

# cineACTION

**WORLD  
CINEMA  
SINCE  
1990**

**LANDMARKS**

**Abbas Kiarostami**

**Mike Leigh**

**Tsai Ming-Liang**

**Brian De Palma**

**PATTERNS**

**US High School Comedies**

**Time and Point of View**

**№58 \$8 CDN \$7 US**





# ISSUE



## THE COLLECTIVE

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## FRONT COVER

*Naked*

## BACK COVER

*Naked*



THE CANADA COUNCIL  
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SINCE 1957



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## PARTY TIME or CAN'T HARDLY WAIT FOR THAT AMERICAN PIE 2

Hollywood High School Movies of the 90s

by Robin Wood

## TIME AND POINT OF VIEW IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA 11

by Temenuga Trifonova

## ARE YOU WITH ME? 32

Unemployed Negativity in  
Mike Leigh's *Naked*

by Garry Watson

## THE IMPORT/EXPORT BUSINESS 46

The Road to Abbas Kiarostami's  
*Taste of Cherry*

by Devin Orgeron

## THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME 52

Failed Male Friendship in  
De Palma's *Snake Eyes*

by David Greven

## FLOWING DESIRE, FLOATING SOULS 58

Modern Cultural Landscape in  
Tsai Ming-Liang's Taipei Trilogy

by I-Fen Wu

## CHOP SUEY 65

Photographs to Remember You By

by Richard Lippe

## BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE 68

In Praise of the Liberal State

by Robert Lightning

## UPCOMING ISSUES

**Issue 59: MAX OPHULS CENTENARY; RADICAL IMPULSES**

Edited by Florence Jacobowitz & Richard Lippe

**Issue 60: ASIAN CINEMAS**

Edited by Susan Morrison

Submissions are welcome.



## EDITORIAL

The theme of this issue, **WORLD CINEMA SINCE 1990: Landmarks and Patterns**, elicited an unusual number of really interesting articles. Choice became very difficult, and I am still not sure if my final choices were the best. I would like to tell those whose work was not used that I enjoyed reading it, and hope they will submit further articles for subsequent issues.

We are currently offering a special price on subscriptions but our rates are about to go up due to an alarming increase in mailing rates. Please note the new prices on the forms below. The price of back issues remains the same, but many issues have already sold out and stocks of others are becoming very low. If you are interested in ordering back issues you are urged to do so quickly!

*Robin Wood*

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| <b>2</b> Women in Contemporary Hollywood   | <b>24/25</b> Feminist Film Theory/Criticism           | <b>39</b> Contemporary World Cinemas                  | <b>SPECIAL 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIV. ISSUE</b> |
| <b>3/4</b> Reading the Text (double issue) | <b>28</b> Canadas: Cinema and Criticism               | <b>40</b> Re-Readings and a Spike Lee Dossier         | <b>51</b> What Happened? 1900-2000          |
| <b>8</b> Revaluation                       | <b>29</b> Revaluation: Hollywood                      | <b>41</b> Style                                       | <b>53</b> Horror                            |
| <b>9</b> Comedy                            | <b>30</b> Framing the Family                          | <b>42</b> Chinese Films                               | <b>54</b> Screwball Comedy                  |
| <b>12</b> Teen Films                       | <b>31</b> Narrative and Film                          | <b>43</b> Films of the 90s                            | <b>55</b> Star Image Icon                   |
| <b>13/14</b> Film Noir (double issue)      | <b>32</b> Race-ing Home: Race and Cultural Identity   | <b>44</b> Performance                                 | <b>56</b> Shifting Narratives               |
| <b>15</b> Interpretation                   | <b>34</b> Modernism                                   | <b>45</b> Canadian Cinema; Festivals                  | <b>57</b> Film in Canada                    |
| <b>16</b> Canadian Cinema                  | <b>35</b> Gays and Hollywood, Queer Cinema            | <b>46</b> The Western: Then and Now                   |   |
| <b>17</b> Re:Positioning                   | <b>36</b> Toronto International Film Festival Reviews | <b>47</b> Anything But Hollywood                      |   |
| <b>19/20</b> Critical Issues               |   | <b>48</b> Canadian Films/Sayles/Third Cinema/Festival |   |

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*Can't Hardly Wait*

Denise ((Lauren Ambrose) with Kenny (Seth Green).

Kenny with his pals.



## PARTY TIME CAN'T HARDLY WAIT

### Hollywood high school movies of the 90s

by **Robin Wood**

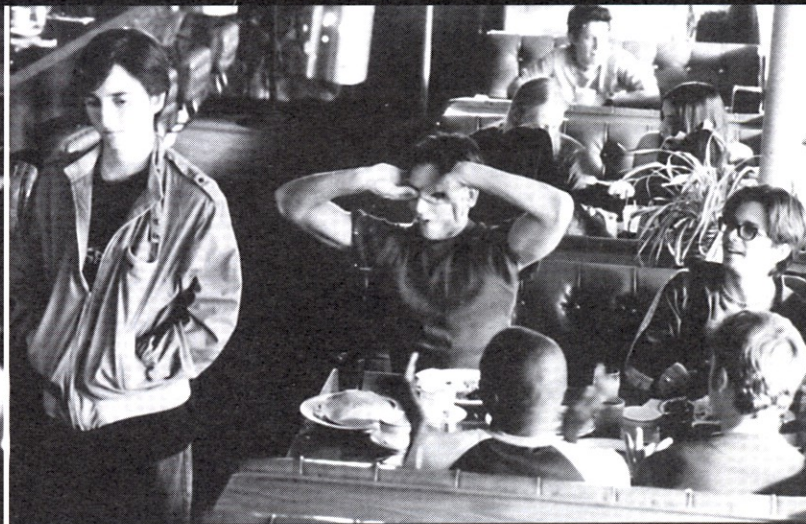
The first question is, I suppose, Why? Why bother, when everyone knows these films are trash? ('Everyone' being the journalist critics, always eager to express their superiority and make themselves look like intellectuals). First, I must confess, personal enjoyment: yes, I actually *enjoy* these films, or at least some of them (and that 'some of them' immediately suggests that there are discriminations to be made, despite the films' apparent indistinguishability, even their titles being confusing). At least the films are about characters (or, at least, 'types') who are more or less recognizable as related to human beings, and are not made primarily by computers (though one may suspect that some of the screenplays were), as opposed to the dominant genre of Hollywood movies today, which consist mainly of special effects and computer-generated explosions. But am I, at the age of seventy-one, hence doubtless on or beyond the verge of senility, merely reliving my youth? (No, my youth was not remotely like that, I was pathologically withdrawn, already gay, riddled with guilt and self-disgust). Fantasizing, then, about the youth I never had? Possibly: I *do* find something seductive in the films' extrovert energy, and perhaps somewhere in me is an alternative self who wishes he could have enjoyed raunchy all-night house parties, especially when they include the destruction of the bourgeois home. But there is a more intellectually defensible reason for my interest.

My central predilection has always been Hollywood, though essentially the classical period (roughly 1930-1960). It's a question of which you value more highly, communal art or personal art. All the richest periods of artistic achievement—Renaissance Italy, the Elizabethan drama, the Vienna of Haydn and Mozart—have been instances of communality: the availability of established genres, the constant interaction among artists, the sense of *belonging* to the culture, of being supported



William (Charlie Korsmo) loosens up.

The morning after: William rejected by Mike.



## FOR THAT AMERICAN PIE

by it, of speaking to and for a wide audience that cuts across all divisions of class and gender. Compare the isolation of the modern artist, the emphasis on self-expression, 'originality', novelty, the audience dwindled to a small elite. But art that is mere 'self-expression' tends to become increasingly impoverished and uninteresting. With Fellini, for example, self-expression reached its apotheosis in *8 1/2*, which fully deserves its established position as a modern masterpiece; everything since seems variously (and comparatively) thin, repetitive, strained. Bergman's work, which once seemed to me the peak of cinematic achievement, has come to satisfy me less and less. His personal psychodramas in which the characters (aspects of the artist's psyche?) appear totally isolated from all social realities, stripped of all social/political context, come to seem increasingly limited in their interest, while the great films of Hawks, Ford, Hitchcock, McCarey, Preminger, Ophuls, Cukor, Sturges (Preston!), Mann (Anthony!), Ray, Sirk... retain their amazing freshness and vitality today. Aside from Ophuls (who returned to Europe), none of these directors survived the collapse of the classical Hollywood system in the 60s, though some continued making films. One could list with ease 300 films from the classical period that remain of great interest, of which about a third can be claimed as masterpieces; because of the existence of shared conventions, genres, forms, shooting methods, stars, even certain works by otherwise quite undistinguished directors retain their vitality and resonance. One would be hard-pressed, I think, to find a comparable tally in the last 30-year period.

Genre cinema today—deprived of the sustaining base of the star/studio system, replaced by a set of businessmen sitting around a conference table asking 'Well, what made the most money last year?' and constructing a 'package' resembling it as

closely as possible but going a little further—obviously survives only in an extremely debased and impoverished form. The great Hollywood movies were genre pictures; the nearest to great movies in Hollywood since the early '60s, when related to a genre at all (e.g. *Bonnie and Clyde*) are inflected toward the European 'art' movie (Penn, early Altman, Scorsese). Largely, the notion of an evolving genre, inflected in various ways by directors and stars, has been replaced by sequels, imitations and remakes. In discussing '90s high school movies I shall not (I warn you now) be unearthing any neglected masterpieces, and very little where one can discern the personal touch, the distinctive enunciation, the creative commitment, of a Ford, a Hawks or a Preminger. This group of films is in no way comparable in quality to the screwball comedies of the late 30s/40s, the *films noirs* of the 40s/50s, the domestic melodramas of the same period, or the continuously evolving Western. The films share, however, a certain generalized sense of energy, a sense of 'having fun' (which Hawks always claimed as the basis of *his* filmmaking), and, as I intimated above, there are distinctions to be made.

There are in fact two viewpoints from which one might interest oneself in a group of films of this nature: the artistic (using the word somewhat loosely) and the sociopolitical. The former will in this case obviously yield the less profit, yet one should expect such a body of work to be of *some* creative interest simply because it resembles, in certain respects if not in others, the kind of communal generic work seen at its highpoint in the classical period. In happier, less cynical working conditions a major figure might have developed out of it, as Bach or Haydn grew out of an already established set of conventions and syntax. This hasn't happened and is not likely to do so, Hollywood having evolved precisely into what it was always accused of



being by shortsighted modernist intellectuals, a factory.

The latter viewpoint is clearly the more productive. The films have been commercially very successful (though today the cycle has lost steam and appears to be in danger of losing its audience with it): a great many young people rushed to see them and enjoy them. That in itself should suggest their importance. Do they *reflect* dominant trends in our culture? Is this what high school students today are like, is this how they behave, are these their values? Or do the films offer seductive fantasies of how young people would *like* things to be? Do the films encourage the behaviour patterns they dramatize? Are they encouraging irresponsibility in an entire generation? Given the films' popularity, can one distinguish any positive, progressive aspects in their treatment of today's teenagers? Such questions are seldom raised or discussed by our journalist reviewers, who find it usually sufficient simply to express their superiority to the films and the behaviour they depict. The older generation typically raises its jaundiced eyebrows in distaste and deplores their possible effect on the young (though at the same time implying that they don't have any because they are, after all, 'just entertainment').

For me, the two approaches are not really separable. On the whole, the better films are the more progressive. This should surprise no one: progressiveness (the desire to 'say something') is typically accompanied by a somewhat greater creative interest, an *aliveness*, whether in the narrative, the writing, or the realization. The rule is not absolute, and the films under discussion provide one (but only one) striking exception, to which I shall return.

The films within a generic cycle will, by definition, share a certain number of specific concerns, thematics, narrative patterns, motifs, character relations, iconography, etc.. I've organized what follows under nine headings, which I mean to represent the underlying thematic structure on which the individual films perform a number of variations:

1. and 2. belong together: I see them as the structuring presence and structuring absence of the cycle as a whole: respectively, sex and education.

3. Literary sources. (Rather surprisingly, six films are relevant here).

4. Parents: presence or absence, relative importance.

5. Gender issues: how do the films reflect the changes in male/female relationships, the changes in attitude, since the Women's Movement of the '60s/'70s?

6. Race. To what extent do the films recognize, characterize, integrate persons of colour?

7. Class. Is class an issue at all? Or is its reality denied (as so commonly in American culture, in 'the land of equal opportunity')?

8. Politics. Do the films show any awareness of wider issues outside the characters' immediate preoccupations?

9. Sexual orientation. Are gays even acknowledged? If so, how are they represented?

Before I work through this list I think I should get out of the way the one exception I noted above to the general sense that the more lively films artistically are also the most progressive. When asked to name the greatest French novelist André Gide famously replied 'Victor Hugo, hélas.' If asked to name the best, overall, of the high school cycle I would feel compelled to say '*American Pie*, hélas.' It strikes me as one of those rare films where 'everything came together': one has the impression that the actors really enjoyed themselves, that there was a constant sense of fun and pleasure in the making of the film, a communal creative engagement more pronounced than in any of the other films. And the film benefits enormously from the presence in the cast of both Jason Biggs and Chris Klein, two of the most engaging and likable of young contemporary male stars. The film is very funny, but also very *sweet*, generous to its characters and with a sort of seductive innocence. It also has a rare supportive father who actually *encourages* his son's interest in sex, much to the latter's embarrassment. From the viewpoint of giving pleasure it is perhaps the best film in the cycle (the chief competitor is *Can't Hardly Wait*). BUT: the women (though never degraded) are generally subordinated to the men; there isn't a single memorable black or Asian presence (an absence very unusual in the cycle as a whole); politics is never even a



*Can't Hardly Wait*  
Preston (Ethan Embry) with the 'Earth Angel.'



Mike (Peter Facinelli) rejected by Amanda (Jennifer Love Hewitt).



marginal issue; and the very possibility of gayness is totally suppressed.

• • • •

The following list is incomplete; it represents the films I have seen (and in many cases saw again when planning this article); most of them are referred to in what follows:

### Major Forerunners

*Porky's* (1981)

*Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982)

*Heathers* (1989)

### The 90s.

*Dazed and Confused* ('93)

*Clueless* ('95)

*Can't Hardly Wait* ('98)

*American Pie* ('99)

*She's All That* ('99)

*Ten Things I Hate About You* ('99)

*Cruel Intentions* ('99)

*Whatever It Takes* (2000)

*Bring It On* (2000)

*Get Over It* (2001)

To these I shall add two very interesting Canadian films, probably not released outside Canada (they were barely released within it, though they are available on video for anyone with the patience to search):

*Kitchen Party* ('97)

*Rollercoaster* ('99)

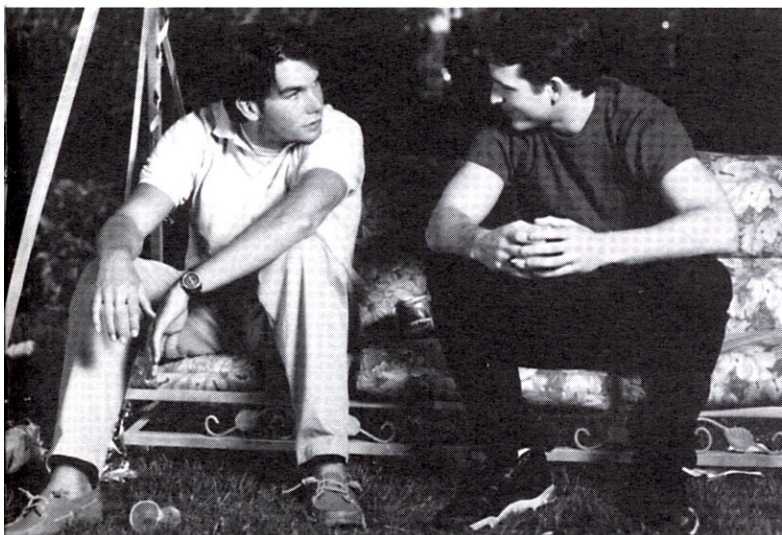
Note: *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* anticipates almost everything in the later films and must be seen as the cycle's origin and archetype; it also remains, in my opinion, easily the best of the 'typical' films. The word 'typical' automatically excludes the other two highly distinguished works, *Dazed and Confused* and *Heathers*, both completely different in tone from all the rest, far darker and more disturbing (when I described the for-

mer in an article as a 'horror' movie I received a message from its director Richard Linklater congratulating me on being the first to notice his intentions!).

### 1. Sex, the structuring presence

Sex is at once the films' primary source of energy and the source of the older generation's discomfiture. Yet is it surprising that our culture is currently sex-obsessed? When I grew up the word itself could not be spoken, unless it was used purely to distinguish between men and women and had no reference to any actual physical activity; it was, in D.H.Lawrence's memorable phrase, 'the dirty little secret'. The contemporary obsession, though perhaps disproportionate, is understandable and inevitable, the opening of long-closed flood-gates. We still have a long way to go. Lawrence tried to purge the sexual terminology of its 'dirty' associations by using the words in their correct senses, but we only have to listen to everyday conversations to see how little he succeeded, the words still being used as 'obscenities'. In a sexually healthy culture 'Fuck you' wouldn't be an insult but a simple question, to which the answer would be either 'Yes, please' or 'No, thank you'.

Typically, the films have twin plots which develop side by side: they might be summed up as 'getting laid' and 'falling in love', apparently two quite distinct pursuits (*Can't Hardly Wait* and *American Pie* are the definitive instances). The films are in fact extremely conservative, for all their determination to shock: the ideal remains true love and monogamy; the women are divided into 'nice girls' (usually virgins) and 'bitches', depending upon whether they attach themselves to the central male character or dump him; notions of sexual freedom or 'free love' are never offered as desirable alternatives to the traditional forms of sexual organization. See, as exemplary, the construction of the 'good couple' in *American Pie*, *Can't Hardly Wait* and *She's All That*: in all three the relationship has not been consummated at the film's end. The 'double standard', despite all the advances of Women's Lib, remains supreme: the boys' charisma is enhanced by 'getting laid', but sexually active girls are generally put down and punished.



Mike learns that college is no better.



Amanda with her pals.



'Graduation' is a central issue in most of the films, which are set in the final year of high school and typically end on or around graduation day. *American Pie* and *Can't Hardly Wait* are linked by more than their temporal proximity (one year apart). The last third of *Pie* takes place during the graduation party, as does virtually the whole of *Can't...* (aside from a few minutes at the beginning and end and one magical sequence in the middle), both parties taking place in private houses rather than at end-of-school proms, etc.. It becomes a question of just what the students are graduating from and to: education or sex? Do you graduate by passing your exams (never given more than passing mention) or by 'getting laid' or 'falling in love'? Which brings me to

## 2. Education, the structuring absence

It comes of course as no surprise to find that neither the characters nor the films express the least interest in education, although, in view of the fact that the characters presumably spend a major part of their lives outside the film in the classroom studying something apart from how to get laid, this might be considered something of an anomaly. What is interesting is that the characters, although forced to spend great stretches of their lives doing things in which they appear to have no interest whatever, never complain. Remarkably few of the films have scenes set in classrooms, and when they do it is either to have the class interrupted, to show notes irrelevant to the lesson being passed surreptitiously, or to show that there are teachers unreasonable enough to get annoyed when it becomes obvious that their students' minds are elsewhere. It never occurs to the characters or to the films to *attack* the system—the organization of education within our culture. The implication is that it is somehow a necessary (if inexplicable) chore, to be endured but never challenged. The point is basically a political one: an attack on our education system (in which human beings are forced at all ages to study things in which they have no interest) would inevitably imply an attack on capitalism itself, since capitalism demands that any genuine and intrinsically valuable education be replaced by career training. Under capitalism, children grow up in an environment in which their elders' interest in knowledge has already been deadened by education, alienated labour and the media, so that the child's natural curiosity about things is stunted more or less from birth. A film that dared say such things could not possibly be made within mainstream commercial cinema and would be far too disturbing to pass for the casual entertainment capitalism requires to distract its victims from any dangerous and subversive suspicions that they may not after all be living in the best of all possible worlds.

The films do occasionally make vague gestures toward the notion that education will have to be taken more seriously when the students pass on to university, a suggestion that the (closely related) movies set in universities do little to substantiate. *Road Trip* is of particular interest here. Its leading character will not graduate unless he gets a B+ in the course he is taking on Greek philosophy, for a paper on Plato's Republic. But, when he should be spending the crucial weekend in last-minute cramming, a far more important issue supervenes: he must

travel over long stretches of America to intercept an incriminating video sent in error to the woman to whom he is engaged. But all is not lost. One of the guys travelling with him turns out to know all about Plato, and fills him in on exactly what he need say on the way home. That moment has great resonance for me. Many is the time I have been approached at the start of a course by a student who asks 'What do I have to do to get a B+ on your course?' The question is asked quite innocently, without the least awareness of how deeply offensive it is. Such a question—and the attitude to learning it implies, and that *Road Trip* casually dramatizes—is, however, thoroughly encouraged, if not actually initiated, by our educational system, which breeds precisely that kind of cynicism. ('Our' here means North America and Britain; I am not familiar with how things are in continental Europe). As the films unwittingly witness, the modern university is merely an extension of our school system, and far more interested in career training than in learning for its own sake, for what, as a fully human being, one might get from it, or for the future of the culture. The fundamental crime of the modern university is to tie courses to grades: the system enforces the *compulsory* education of high school, compelling students (though now adults) to take courses in which they have no interest whatever, with teachers they may despise, simply to get a B+. A form of prostitution, in fact (Jean-Luc Godard once defined prostitution as 'Doing something you don't want to do, for money'). Capitalism might be defined as institutionalized prostitution, and our universities are now its servants).

My own experience in a British university fifty years ago was very different. There was no connection between courses and grades. Taking a course did not involve writing essays, you took it because you were interested in the subject matter or impressed by the teacher (who would not even have your name on a list). When I started as a naive freshman I attended about a dozen courses a week during my first month because I assumed it was what I should be doing; by my third month I was attending perhaps three, spending the rest of my time far more profitably reading books, listening to music, going to movies, discussing everything I read, saw or heard with my friends, writing an essay a fortnight to discuss with my personal supervisor (still with no grade attached). That university system was far from perfect, allowing tenured professors to continue giving the same lectures year after year from the same notes to almost empty lecture-rooms, and leaving one's fate dependent upon the end-of-year examinations. But compared with what we have today it seems to me almost paradisaical. One could really study for learning's sake, for interest's sake, for the development of mind and spirit, and not only within the immediate framework of one's 'subject' or of academic demands. Music and film have been a vital part of my education, but I wasn't officially 'taking' either. Everything I studied I studied because I wanted to, and I had all the time in the world for it, uninterrupted by useless, tedious courses in which I had no interest. As for people who weren't really interested in studying at all but were there only to delay entry into the work force, or because it was expected of a 'gentleman', they seldom lasted beyond the first year exams. There are plenty of training



colleges available. The true university doesn't exist any more, greatly to the impoverishment of our culture. My own university education, by the way, was paid for entirely by the British government; I was never subjected to the anxieties contingent upon student loans, nor did I have to take part-time jobs, because I was given a grant to cover my living expenses, above and beyond tuition fees etc., most of which went to the purchase of records, a major part of my education in rarely performed (at that time) twentieth century music. Without it I might never have discovered Nielsen's symphonies or the later works of Stravinsky, both essential to any education in the arts.

To say that academic standards have fallen would be an understatement: they have collapsed completely, to the extent that, if one receives a really good essay in an undergraduate course, one immediately suspects that it has been plagiarized. It is becoming increasingly common for courses to be graded on 'tests', sometimes requiring answers of just a few sentences, culled from 'required reading' texts—presumably the current means of encouraging original thinking. Those old fuddy-duddies like myself who demand essays are frequently rewarded with partly incomprehensible attempts by students for whom English is a second language—not, of course, the student's fault (and the intermittent glimmers of comprehensibility sometimes suggest that this might, given a command of the language, be one of the most interesting students in the class), but how is one to grade a paper one can't understand? The simple suggestion that students should not be allowed into courses demanding essay-writing before they have mastered the language is frowned upon as 'racist'. I vividly remember, however, one essay on which I wrote something to the effect that 'I really cannot pass this because it is incomprehensible. I respect your problems as a foreign student, but it is unwise to enrol in a course that requires essays until you have mastered English'. When it was handed back I was confronted by its author, a very angry young Caucasian Canadian who believed I was being deliberately insulting or sarcastic... More recently, I received a letter from an old friend who went through university with me and, like me, became a professor, also (like me) retired, in which he suggested that, as things are going, the time would soon arrive when a student would be given an A+ for answering correctly the question 'Name one character in *Hamlet*'.

So much for the structuring presence and absence; the rest of my headings apply less consistently, their presence or absence flitting in and out from film to film.

### 3. Literary Adaptations

Given the generally humble aspirations of these films ('making money' is a humble aspiration, though most of us are forced to make it our chief one), it seems curious that their makers seek a spurious intellectual prestige by adapting plots sanctified by past highly respected literary works. What is the rationale? Respectability? Hardly: the films otherwise court its opposite. A sense that 'It worked before so it will work again'? Mere laziness? I'm not sure. But some of the screenplays have a certain freshness and sophistication, and one would like to believe that the references derive from a degree of ambition to construct a resonance, however compromised by the supposed demands of

the cycle's supposed audience, many of whom would, I think, be willing to be carried much further than the films are willing to take them.

For the record, the borrowings are: *Clueless*/*Emma*; *Ten Things I Hate About You*/*The Taming of the Shrew*; *Whatever It Takes*/*Cyrano de Bergerac*; *She's All That*/*Pygmalion*; *Cruel Intentions*/*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*; *Get Over It*/*A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Just to complicate matters, one might add that *Ten Things I Hate About You* and *She's All That* have almost the same plot, although adapted from completely different sources (but, intriguingly, made the same year): roughly, a bet: the man must woo an apparently recalcitrant and hostile woman and persuade her to be his partner at the graduation prom.

### 4. Parents/home

Most of the films seem reluctant to suggest that all these high school students actually come from somewhere, that they have a specific background. The mother's presence is particularly negligible, by far the most important mother being the dead one of *She's All That*, continuing to exert her influence on the heroine, and on the whole beneficially. Fathers are generally obstructive and a nuisance (in my experience a reasonable supposition). *She's All That* is especially interesting here too, as it produces two contrasted fathers, negative and positive, respectively upper- and working-class, the hero's and the heroine's. Aside from the comic father (Eugene Levy) of *American Pie*, the working-class father of *She's All That* (which will emerge, by the way, as the most progressive of the films, if not necessarily the 'best') is the only supportive father in the entire cycle, even ultimately constructing the *mise-en-scene* for the central couple's union.

### 5. Gender

The films in general manage to acknowledge that women are now (in theory) on equal terms with men, asserting themselves and making choices, where before choice was a male prerogative. Yet the films remain resolutely male-centred, the main action (the 'plot') invariably initiated by the males. The nearest exception is *Clueless* (adapted from a novel by a woman, directed by a woman), in which the active female character's motivation is to find a suitable male partner for her protégée. There are, however, two films in which the central thematic impetus is provided by a mutual education between male and female (*Ten Things I Hate About You* and *She's All That*), and in the latter it is the male who more requires educating.

### 6. Race

Almost all the films scrupulously include black or Asian characters—but *never* in leading roles or as objects of desire for the white characters, male or female (there is no miscegenation in high schools, outside the admirable *Zebrahead* (1992), which I have not included here because it is so untypical, belonging more to the 'social problem movie' than to the high school movie, in which social problems generally don't exist). Blacks are used mainly in supportive roles, friends of the white male lead, which at once establishes his lack of prejudice, his open-



ness to difference, his generosity, and asserts his *superiority*: he has the main role, he 'gets the girl', there is never any suggestion that *he* might fall in love with a black or Asian woman, or, conversely, that the (white) woman he loves, whether 'bitch' or 'nice girl', will be sexually interested in a male from another ethnic group. The kind of genteel hypocrisy going on here—blacks and other ethnic groups are *just great*, we've nothing against them, but *of course* we couldn't possibly be attracted to them—is among the more contemptible and retrograde aspects of this group of films, though reviewers never seem to notice it or find it worth comment.

## 7. Class

Is class an issue at all? Officially, it doesn't exist in America, even though there are millionaires and homeless people living in the same cities, but that's just what you deserve, because everyone is born equal. The one intelligently supportive father, the heroine's in *She's All That*, structurally paralleled with the hero's problematic and oppressive father, is less concerned with his offspring's 'success' than with her happiness and fulfilment, presented as quite distinct goals.

## 8. Politics

In the majority of the films one has the impression that the characters, obsessed with 'getting laid' or with finding the ideal love, have no interest in politics (national, global or sexual) or political action. The most prominent exception is Laney (Rachel Leigh Cook) in *She's All That*. One feels, at times, that the films' defining characteristic, their *raison d'être* within the grotesque present phase of capitalist culture, where even the future existence of life on the planet is at stake, is indeed the *suppression* of political thought. What, after all, might happen if all these young people suddenly ceased to be preoccupied with 'getting laid' as life's ultimate goal? The current Emperor of the World (and President of the United States) might find the idea quite worrying, if his obviously severely limited imagination can stretch that far.

## 9. Sexual Orientation

The changing social attitude to gays and lesbians has been one of the most striking (and one of the very few encouraging) features of the last decade: nowadays, one scarcely encounters an adult comedy without at least one gay character. But where did they all go to school? Of the *American* films listed, only two (*Clueless* and *Can't Hardly Wait*) have the guts to raise the issue of gayness at all, the former marginally, the latter very confusingly. (*Get Over It*, the most recent of the cycle and easily the worst, has Martin Short as a drama teacher, embarrassingly still doing the kind of insulting gay stereotype that one thought went out when the '90s began). Interestingly, both the Canadian films listed raise the issue prominently and responsibly, together with that other subject totally excluded from the American films, teen suicide, but their whole tone is utterly different. (I wrote on Scott Smith's remarkable *Rollercoaster* in the last issue). The problem seems to be, How do you raise it in the context of high school (given, for example, the horrifyingly high percentage of gay teen suicides and the fact that high

schools are notoriously still a stronghold of homophobia) without destroying the general sense of euphoric comedy? Elton, in Amy Heckerling's generally delightful movie (named simultaneously after the Reverend Elton in Jane Austen's novel and Elton John!), is never permitted a boyfriend and seems to have very little intercourse of any kind with anyone except the heroine. *Can't Hardly Wait* introduces an ambiguous gay subplot more centrally, to the film's credit, but sends out such mixed messages that it's virtually impossible to unravel what the film is actually saying. But it is at least *possible* to read the character of Mike (the high school's leading jock/ladykiller), when he is taunted as being a 'fag', as realizing that he is actually gay, although living in a state of total denial. The film lacks any *positive* attitude to gayness (except perhaps in its magical one quiet moment, the 'Barry Manilow' scene with the 'angel', away from the noise of the party) and throws around the word 'fag' somewhat indiscriminately, but at least it shows some awareness that there is an issue there.

Leaving aside *Dazed and Confused* and *Clueless* (both highly idiosyncratic and personal films by directors who had already distinguished themselves), I would single out *American Pie* (for all-round excellence), *Can't Hardly Wait* (for its energy, its inventiveness, its uniformly marvellous performances from an *ensemble* cast, the unpredictability—a rare virtue in these films—of certain of its plot developments) and *She's All That* (for its progressiveness, but especially for its last ten minutes); it goes just a little further than its near-contemporary mirror-reflection *Ten Things I Hate About You*, which also deserves commendation, besides introducing two young actors who are becoming prominent (Julia Stiles, Heath Ledger). *American Pie* can be left to fend for itself, its virtues being obvious and straightforward; I have a few more words on the other two.

*Can't Hardly Wait* offers a fascinating comparison with the Canadian *Kitchen Party*, the first feature of Gary Burns, both films taking place within about fifteen hours, mostly occupied by graduation parties, the parties located in the homes of parents (who are of course absent) and culminating in the desecration of the parental bourgeois home. Both films include one distanced, intelligent young woman who positions herself outside the celebratory festivities. The similarities highlight the extreme differences. The exuberance of the American movie is totally lacking in the Canadian, whose tone is far more serious and (for want of a better word) 'realistic', bourgeois life (which the American films implicitly celebrate, even if its strictures are an occasional nuisance) is here narrow, repressive and generally stultifying. The desecration of the home is merely funny in *Can't Hardly Wait*, whereas the climactic (and final) moment of *Kitchen Party* has the son (threatened with being denied university if there is a single spot on the bourgeois carpet, hence the film's title) deliberately opening a bottle of beer in the deserted living-room as he hears his parents returning, and pouring out its contents as they enter—the film's moment of liberation, which makes me burst into tears every time I see it. The film also includes one character who *may* be gay, and who locks himself in a car and contemplates suicide for a long stretch of the running time. Parents play a far larger part than in any of the American films, Burns intercutting scenes of the kids' party





*Ten Things I Hate About You*; Tamer (Heath Ledger) confronts Shrew (Julie Stiles) under the interested eye of Ms. Perky (Allison Janney)

with scenes of the parents' party in another location. The American films merely *assume* that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the generations; *Kitchen Party* deals with this as an essential aspect of the subject matter. Predictably, the film was a commercial disaster, since adults have no interest in teen movies and teens (apparently) have no interest in films that fail to indulge them. I apologize to readers outside Canada for writing about a film they will probably never have a chance to see, but there is no better way of suggesting the limitations within which the American films operate. *Kitchen Party* is an excellent movie that deserves universal distribution; it repays repeated viewings more than any of the American films.

The distinction of *Can't Hardly Wait* (for which two directors, one female, one male, share the credits—Deborah Kaplan and Harry Elfont, who have since collaborated on the well-received but quite dreadful *Josie and the Pussycats*) lies partly in its almost nonstop energy (somewhat exhausting until one learns to adjust) and the uniformly splendid performances by a superb ensemble cast of young actors who seem mostly to have disappeared, but more in its creative use of the formulas, arousing certain expectations then surprising us by negating them. Structurally, the film is built upon the construction (actual or potential) of three partially interacting couples, only one of which is signalled as such from the outset: Preston (Ethan

Embry) and Amanda (Jennifer Love Hewitt); Kenny (Seth Green) and Denise (Lauren Ambrose); Mike (Peter Facinelli) and William (Charlie Korsmo). At the outset, Preston is established as the 'serious' lover, Kenny as the one whose ambition is to 'get laid'. Initially, Preston is paired with Denise, but as her friend; their conversation establishes his crush on Amanda, the most popular girl in the school, to whom he has never dared to speak but to whom he has now written a letter expressing his love which he intends to give her at the party. Expectation: he will learn to abandon his adolescent romanticism and accept Denise as his right mate. Actual ending: after numerous mishaps, complications and misunderstandings, Amanda gets the letter, is touched by it, and the couple end up together.

Kenny's aim is strikingly *unromantic*: he is desperate to lose his virginity (an issue much elaborated upon in *American Pie* the following year). Expectation: after various obligatory comic mishaps he will get his wish and prove his manhood. Actual resolution: On the point of realizing his ambition, while practising positions from the *Kama Sutra*, he gets accidentally locked in the bathroom with Denise, whom he dumped in Junior school because she was too serious and not conventionally attractive, not *prestigious* enough; after working through their mutual antagonisms they recognize their genuine attraction to each other and make love on the washroom floor, but



not very successfully—Kenny becomes aware of his own inexperience and the (marginally) more experienced Denise is quite frank with him about his inadequacy. By the film's end they have established a tentative on/off relationship.

The Mike/William subplot is the most intriguing, but the filmmakers seem (understandably, in the context and with the expected audience) somewhat scared of developing it: the implications are clear enough, but not so clear that homophobic teenagers will feel forced to confront them. At the outset it is established that the two young men have been enemies throughout school, Mike (school stud, sports hero, lover of the almost iconic Amanda) using William (the intellectual, the 'geek', the 'nerd') as a butt for cruel jokes. William, with the assistance of two of his pals, sets up his revenge: lured out to the pool house, Mike will be leapt upon, chloroformed, stripped, and placed very publicly in a compromising position with another male. Expectation: the plot will succeed, Mike will be humiliated, the geeks will triumph (a teen comedy is obliged to offer satisfactions to *all* potential members of its audience). Actual outcome: Mike is publicly humiliated by Amanda when he attempts (somewhat drunk) to re-establish his relationship with her, expecting her gratitude. When she strips him of all his pretensions one of the young women in the audience yells out 'Fag!', and he staggers off in terror. William, still pursuing his own revenge, follows him into another room and tries to lure him out to the bathhouse, but stops abruptly when he finds Mike in a state of collapse. Mike tells him he has been called a 'fag', staggers over to him, puts his arms around his neck, and apologizes for his past behaviour. To William's mixed delight and dismay the action becomes a prolonged embrace; the song on the soundtrack (diegetically, the music playing for the party, hence just 'accidentally' occurring at this moment of the film) has the words 'I'll make love to you/Like you want me to/And I'll hold you tight...' (but it is easy to ignore, as similar songs have been playing almost throughout the film). William's response is at most ambiguous, but it seems primarily readable as his delight that the school hero has revealed his vulnerability and is now miraculously his friend. At this moment (conveniently?!) the police raid the party. William helps his drunken friend (potential lover?) outside, inevitably to the pool house at the back, where his two inept cronies (who have both lost their flashlights) immediately chloroform them both, strip them and leave them apparently amorously entwined.

The resolution again does not insist upon a gay subtext but allows anyone who wants to find one without great difficulty. We learn that Mike has saved William from certain disgrace (with his parents as well as the arresting cops) by claiming that the whole chloroform plot was his, to compromise William. The Mike of the film's first half would never be capable of such a gesture. Their final confrontation the next morning (the almost proverbial 'cold light of dawn') is especially interesting. In a cafe, Mike is going through his habitual macho routines with his pals when William appears, in the evident expectation that their new relationship will be continued; Mike rejects and humiliates him. But this is followed by the *American Graffiti*-inspired printed end-statement about the characters' future lives (one allotted to each of the three 'couples'). Mike's tells us

that he has become overweight, taken to drink, and lost both his prestige and his job (as 'groundsman') because of 'incriminating polaroids'. It is left to the viewers' discretion to guess just what these photographs may reveal.

Although *She's All That* has no gay characters, it does at least acknowledge the gay presence in schools, and in a very positive (if decidedly unobtrusive) way: as preparations are made for the school graduation prom, we see a number of different groups carrying placards supporting Laney (Rachel Leigh Cook, the Eliza Dolittle character) as Prom Queen, a student directing them as to where the placards are to be placed. To one group he says 'Gay Students? Over there'. It is the only film of the entire group that acknowledges that such an organization might exist. Further, the moment is followed immediately by another placard announcing that Laney is 'The Pro-choice Choice'. Not only does the film have (uniquely) a thoroughly politicized heroine (who is also an artist), it also suggests that her popularity as Prom Queen rests upon the support of politically active, progressive groups of students. She also has the support of the film as a whole, which is clearly thoroughly behind her.

It's a pity the film isn't better: the plot is too obvious, and (perhaps because we all know what's going to happen) is perfunctorily worked out; Laney is so obviously attractive from the start (all she needs is a bit of makeup and a better hairdo). The 'bitch' character (anyone who dumps Freddy Prinze junior *must* be bad) is treated with the usual brutality for being sexually active. But one criterion for judging these films is, do they ever surprise us?, and the last ten minutes of the film contain a series of surprises: 1. Contrary to all the narrative odds, Laney is *not* elected Prom Queen (she loses to the 'bitch', and the film actually calls into question what being a Prom Queen amounts to anyway). 2. The black presence, unusually strong throughout the film (while still there to 'support' the white characters), becomes almost the dominant element in the celebrations. 3. Perhaps the greatest surprise of all, though not a political one: there is a terrific dance number, wonderfully choreographed and executed, almost worthy of Minnelli or Kelly/Donen. 4. Freddy Prinze Jr. frantically rushes around the city trying to find the hotel where Laney is supposedly being raped; he fails, and it turns out that she was perfectly able to take care of herself, thank you, with the help of a blast-gun that destroys her rapist's hearing in one ear. 5. She does not relinquish anything; her commitment to art is confirmed; her would-be transformer has (unlike Professor Higgins) learnt more from her than she has from him, and he accepts this unproblematically.

#### Author's final comment

I would just like to stress that, in devoting a lot of time to these films over the past few months, I don't feel at all that the time has been wasted. I even wonder whether, in the future, the better ones will seem even better, and this article will be seen as somewhat condescending. They have given me a lot of pleasure, and a number of surprises.

The best are certainly in need of recognition. They represent, after all, the potential strengths of a communal art, which the mainstream in its more grandiose manifestations has forfeited.



# Time and Point of View in Contemporary Cinema

by Temenuga Trifonova

In *Cinema II* Deleuze situates the beginnings of what he calls the cinema of "the time-image" in post World War II European cinema, specifically in Italian neo-realism. This is a cinema of duration, whether psychological duration (emphasizing the characters' inability to act) or the duration of things (the characters' failure to act allows things and events to express themselves independently of the characters' subjective interpretation of them). Time is either affective (psychological) or existential (it reveals the being of things by drawing attention to their sheer presence). While the cinema of the time-image can be described as a cinema of reflection or ambience, the majority of the films made over the last few decades are no longer preoccupied with portraying the failure of action or of comprehension (a failure Deleuze attributes to the traumatic war experience), nor do they attempt to remain purely denotative (foregrounding the sheer existence of things, their absurdity).

Time in contemporary cinema is not a means to an end but has become the end itself. The new role of the flashback illustrates this trend well. The flashback is most commonly used as a technique for imparting information to the audience about a char-



*Run, Lola, Run*





acter's motivation or his/her past; however, in many contemporary films it encompasses the entire film. Its function now is to increase the level of ambiguity in the film, to conflate the present with the past, the real with the unreal. Time is no longer that through which things and people reveal themselves (time as change) but rather the source of a confusion of the real with the imaginary, whether this confusion results from the malfunctioning of memory, or from a discrepancy between the point of view within the story and the point of view from which the story is told, or from an incongruity between different levels of knowledge or self-consciousness within one character or among characters.

Errol Morris' documentary *A Brief History of Time*, based on the book by Stephen Hawking, follows the attempts of Hawking and his colleagues to explain the origin of the universe. Towards the end of the film, the hypothesis is put forward that the universe should not be conceived as originating from a singular point since the laws of physics break down when one tries to explain the universe in terms of singularity. The concept of *imaginary time* is introduced as a means of avoiding the problem of singularity. In this new model, the universe is smooth and self-contained (visually the model of the universe existing in imaginary time is represented by an elliptical form with no edge, no boundary, no beginning). This model excludes any notion of a creation event. Not only is the universe not created by God, but it is equally incorrect to say that it is created from nothing: there is no "nothing" in the midst of which the universe suddenly springs forth. As one of Hawking's colleagues remarks, in this model the use of verb tenses is no longer appropriate. The theory of imaginary time, or of an infinite universe, bears a striking resemblance to Henri Bergson's idea of pure memory developed in *Matter and Memory* (1896). Bergson envisions our mental life, and the universe as

well, as having no beginning and, instead, infinitely stretched out 'towards' or 'into' pure memory.

According to Bergson, *déjà vu* is a privileged experience insofar as it reveals the true nature of our mental life: its infinity, or, what amounts to the same, the infinity of time. In *déjà vu* we remember something that we cannot attribute to our own past, but which seems to come from some anonymous, impersonal past. Since we are too busy meeting the demands of the present, we suppress those memories that are not immediately relevant to our present. If it were not for this narrowing down of our mental life, we would be constantly experiencing *déjà vu*, i.e., reliving an impersonal past. Bergson believes that everything has already happened an infinite number of times and that if we were able to expand our mental life to its true proportions, we would see that time is infinite, that our lives have been repeating themselves infinitely, without beginning or end, and that it is namely because of this infinite repetition that we exist at all. The infinity of time or consciousness is independent of our realization of it: it is not because we experience *déjà vu* that time is infinite; rather, *we experience déjà vu because time (and consciousness) is infinite*. Time's infinity does not need a material proof such as a particular *deja vu* experience, but a *déjà vu* experience always presupposes (and reveals) the infinity of time and consciousness. This is exactly the kind of relationship Sartre posits between pre-reflective and reflective consciousness: the former does not need to be reflected in a higher consciousness, but the latter always presupposes (and reveals) a pre-reflective cogito. In this sense, we can think of reflective consciousness as repetition, which renders manifest the pre-reflective aspect of consciousness that usually remains hidden but which is the condition of possibility of reflective consciousness.

Memory occupies an ambivalent position in this model.<sup>1</sup>





On one hand, memory is the standard on the basis of which the real is distinguished from the unreal. In Christopher Nolan's *Memento* the past ceases to be automatically preserved in the present, as a result of which it becomes more and more difficult to distinguish events that have really happened from those that have not happened: the film makes visible the power of memory to separate *real* from *unreal events*. On the other hand, insofar as pure memory is atemporal, eternal, even that which one fails to remember could have just as well taken place, indeed it *must* have taken place, because in an eternal universe everything has always already happened. In this respect, memory affirms the compossibility of the real and the unreal. Alternatively, films like *The Spanish Prisoner*, *The Princess and the Warrior* and *Run, Lola, Run* emphasize the difficulty in distinguishing events that have been planned or even *destined* from events that are purely *accidental*. The *virtual* is precisely this indistinguishability or compossibility of the real and the unreal, neither of which ever supplants the other.

The virtual in cinema exists on two levels: on the level of cinematography and on the level of point of view. A perfect example of a virtual cinematography is The Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix* (1999), which employs a technique known as "bullet-time photography." One of the eye-catching scenes has Neo and the agents dodge bullets. To suggest the incredible speed with which the characters are moving, the cinematographer either superimposes several images of the body in different positions or slows down to an incredible degree the body's movements. In both cases, speed is suggested not, as might be expected, by means of increasing the frequency of movements or the abruptness of the change from one position of the body to the next, but just the opposite, by slowing down the movement as much as possible, in fact by presenting the body as almost immobile. To suggest great speed (which is itself imper-

ceptible) it is not necessary to divide the movement into many points: speed is not represented by an increase in the number of points/moments through which the movement passes but rather by a slowing down of the image. In general, the more easily perceptible or the slower the movement, the easier it is to divide it into segments, whereas the faster and the more imperceptible the movement, the better it is represented by intensifying or saturating the image. In this respect, the slowing down of an image to represent speed is analogous to a close-up of a face to suggest strong emotion.

Included in the DVD release of *The Matrix* is a short documentary explaining the idea of bullet time photography, using the dodging bullets scene as an example. Single photographs of the different stages or points in the movement of the body (Neo falling down as he tries to dodge the bullets) are taken and then scanned into a computer. Once provided with this series of stills, the computer generates in-between drawings ('inter-pollations'), which create the impression of movement from one still to the next. Thus, the exceptionally fast movement we see on the screen is a combination of real frames and computer generated frames. The movement can then be stretched out or compressed, depending on the way in which one alternates real with computer generated frames, making the moments in-between the captured frames longer or shorter. One of the spe-

1 Given the increasingly important place of memory in contemporary cinema, one wonders what the implications of this trend could be for the old "Montage-or-Bust" controversy (whether montage is essential to cinema or not). Does the interest in the workings of memory demand a revival of montage? For a discussion of montage as a form of simulation versus "naturalism" or representational cinema, see Metz 31-91. Although Metz's position is that cinema "is language, above and beyond any particular effect of montage" (47), one needs to examine more carefully the nature of memory: is memory a form of pure expression i.e., is it denotative, or does it rather belong to signification (hence it presupposes and demands montage)? Patrick Fuery, for instance, believes that "[s]igns of time and memory usually have connotative values of reliable or unreliable" (155), as in *Last Year at Marienbad*.



cial effects specialists working on *The Matrix* remarks that thanks to the introduction of computers in cinematography, the camera has been dissociated or liberated from its subject matter. The camera no longer depends on the real movement of bodies in its reproduction of movement. It can now *create* movement and even combine it with real movement. The camera has become *virtual*. Film no longer represents only real movement but the illusion of movement: *virtual movement*.

*The Matrix*, then, poses a challenge to Christian Metz's argument that movement creates the impression of reality in cinema<sup>2</sup> insofar as "the spectator always sees movement as being present [presence is assumed to be the criterion for establishing the real]"(8). Movement is the paramount guarantee of the sense of reality in cinema because movement is intangible:

Movement is insubstantial. We see it, but it cannot be touched, which is why it cannot encompass two degrees of phenomenal reality, the 'real' and the copy. ...The strict distinction between object and copy...dissolves on the threshold of motion. Because movement is never material but is always visual, to reproduce its appearance is to duplicate its reality. ...In the cinema the impression of reality is also the reality of the impression, the real presence of motion. (8-9)

The movement represented by bullet time photography is still insubstantial and visual. The question, however, is whether there is a difference between the visual nature of real movement and the visual nature of computer generated movement. Real movement is always perceived as present, but is this also true of movement reconstituted from a series of real and computer simulated frames? From Metz's point of view, it would seem that the more technologically advanced cinema becomes, the more it alienates itself from its own nature and the more closely it begins resembling photography, whose major characteristic is that it presents only the trace of past movements.

The second level on which the virtual functions is a film's point of view. A point of view is virtual if it confuses the real and the unreal. However, it is not that the real is mistaken for the unreal (or the other way around); rather, *the origin of the unreal cannot be situated in real time*. Because of the unreliable, unreal, virtual point of view (whether the unreliability of the point of view is the result of deception or self-deception), the film does not have a clear beginning, although it usually has a clear end (when the deception or self-deception is revealed). Films like *Memento*, *Following*, *The Spanish Prisoner*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Open Your Eyes* (and its remake *Vanilla Sky*), and *Fight Club* employ a virtual point of view (the point of view belongs to an imaginary character, or to a dead character, or to a character who has been deceived or who has deceived himself), which manifests itself most clearly in an incongruity between the visual and the narrative aspects of these films. Even if the film reveals the source of deception/self-deception, either the distinction between the real and the unreal is preserved on the level of narrative but not on the level of images, or the two are distinguished visually but confused narratively. Some of these films tell a story refracted through a mixture of memory and imagination, while others tell a story whose untruthfulness or

unreality is later exposed. The importance of memory (and, accordingly, of the flashback) cannot be overestimated. This fascination with presenting events as reconstructed or remembered rather than as taking place in the present confirms Metz's belief that memory is the key to understanding the phenomenology of narrative (and of film narrative in particular). Since "an event must in some way have ended before its narration can begin"(Metz 23), every account of events must, by necessity, be already a product of memory: "Reality does not tell stories, but memory, because it is an account, is entirely imaginative"(23). Memory is the condition of possibility for any narrative act, including a film. Films that present events as remembered or reconstructed could be seen as the film equivalent of metafiction or self-referential fiction, since they draw attention to the phenomenology of film narrative as such, to the fact that *memory is the very condition of possibility of any kind of narrative*. Thus, films in which memory plays a significant role—both as a subject matter and as a strategy for telling the story—problematize the possibility of narrative i.e., the relationship between events and the account of events.

Is it really necessary for an event to end before its narration can begin? Could the narration of an event precede the event itself? How does one determine the end of an event, i.e., how does one distinguish the memory of an event (its imaginative reconstruction) from the real event? Could the narration of an event begin before the event has ended, in the middle of it, as it were? The films I am going to discuss here all pose these questions in one form or another. They are particularly appropriate for this discussion since they all deal with the theme of deception or self-deception, demonstrating that the question of the relationship between events and their narration is also the question of the relationship between the real and the unreal. The point of view in these films is virtual insofar as it is either impossible to situate the origin of unreal events on a real timeline (even if such is present in the film) or the representation of events relies on an inverted hierarchy of causes and effects, where effects are represented as preceding rather than following causes. Whatever the particular deception, dream, or unreality these films represent, its eventual revelation on the level of *plot* always fails to distinguish, even retrospectively, between the real and the unreal, which have been conflated *visually*. The knowledge that certain events in the film have been mistakenly assumed real is never sufficient to establish the precise point at which the real was compromised.

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Everything in David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) hinges on the question of from whose point of view the story is told. When we watch the film for the first time we assume the story is told from the point of view of Edward Norton's character, even though we never learn his name (we only know some of his made up names—Cornelius, Rupert—under which he attends the meetings of various support groups). At the end of the film, we find out that Tyler Durton—played by Brad Pitt—is, in fact, another side of 'Cornelius', a hallucinatory representation of the kind of man Cornelius wants to be but is afraid to be. Tyler's two lives are never clearly separated—it is because Cornelius' life overlaps with Tyler's, both penetrating each other at certain



points, that Norton's character is eventually able to realize that he is Tyler Durton. Norton's character does not suffer from a split personality disorder (this is not a movie about schizophrenia, pathology); he is simply in "bad faith" (Sartre): he is afraid to admit that he is not only Cornelius the conscientious office worker, Ikea boy, insomniac, but he is also Tyler Durton, a free man.

We expect the story to be told from the point of view of Cornelius, who gradually realizes that he is Tyler: indeed, the film opens with Cornelius, who then meets Tyler (played by a different actor), and it ends with Cornelius realizing he is Tyler. At least this is what we see on the screen. However, the voiceover represents a completely different point of view: the voiceover belongs to Tyler i.e., to Cornelius *after* he has realized that he is Tyler. Thus, the images and the voiceover (the visual and the linguistic or narrative elements of the film) represent two different, and in fact opposed, points of view. The film must find a way to address the paradox that on one hand, Cornelius is always already Tyler (from the moment Tyler appears as a separate character) while, on the other hand, the film wants to trace the history of Cornelius' realization that he is Tyler. The story cannot be told from Cornelius' point of view, because it would not make sense psychologically in retrospect: the unity of the character's consciousness would not have been established if from the very beginning it was split into two separate consciousnesses. The only way the unity of the protagonist's consciousness can be restored is to tell the story from the point of view of Tyler, because Tyler represents the reflective consciousness, the consciousness that 'knows' that it is Cornelius who has suppressed his identity with Tyler. However, visually this would have made no sense: there would be no film if from the very beginning we were shown only one character, if Cornelius' alter-ego were not embodied in a separate character. Thus, the two limitations or conditions the film faces are: how to combine psychological authenticity (unity of consciousness) with the necessity of presenting the history of the character's transformation, or how to represent consciousness in the act of changing (expanding). The only way to do this is, precisely, to split the point of view between the two major elements of the film: the images and the voiceover. The point of view is not split between the two different actors representing the two sides of the protagonist; rather, *it is split only in terms of the structural elements of the film itself: visually the story is told from Cornelius' point of view, whereas the voiceover represents Tyler's point of view.* The images represent pre-reflective consciousness, the voiceover reflective consciousness. Although we assume that the voiceover expresses the thoughts of the character we see on the screen (Norton's character), in reality the voiceover is not contemporaneous with the character, but represents Tyler's *retrospective* point of view. Such a complete separating of voice from image would have been rather jarring—it seems only natural to us that there should be a continuity between the image of a man and his thoughts/words—but we only become aware of it retrospectively. The voiceover determines the kinds of images we are going to see: the images simply illustrate the story told by the voiceover. We don't see any irrelevant images, images that are not within the control of the

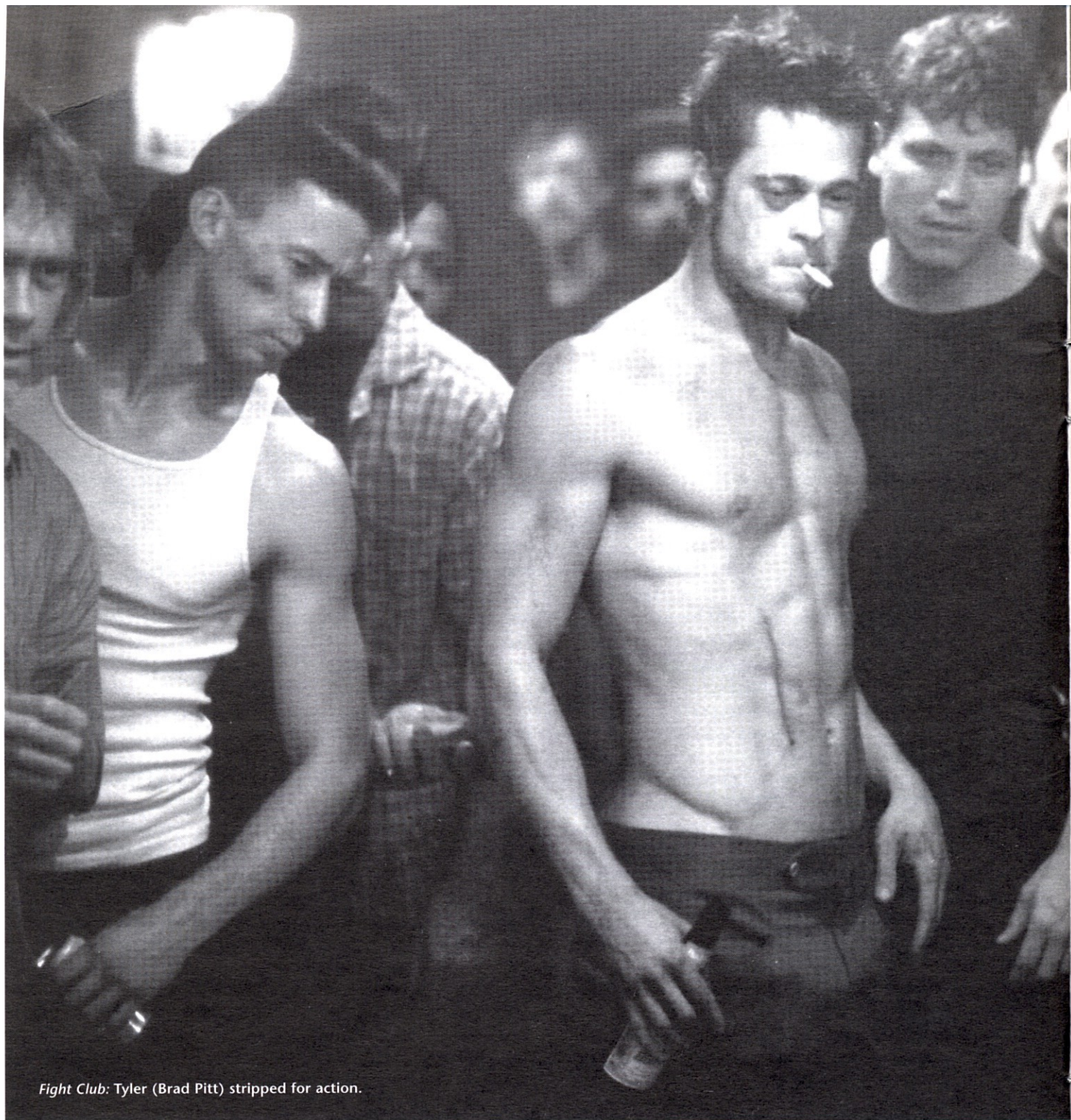
voiceover. The voiceover is privileged over the visual aspect of the film because the voiceover represents a higher, reflective consciousness, which is now trying to reconstruct the sequence of events which led up to the realization of the identity of Cornelius with Tyler. The subordinate role of the images is such that it does not even matter if the events the voiceover is recounting really happened or not. Whatever the voice says must be demonstrated with images, including events that never actually took place: at one point Cornelius wishes for a plane crash and although the plane does not crash, his wish is dramatized visually.

The splitting of the point of view produces a splitting of film time as well. Time flows in two opposite directions: visually it flows forward (from Cornelius' ignorance of his own identity to Cornelius' realization that he is Tyler), but narratively (on the level of voiceover) time flows backwards (tracing retrospectively Cornelius' process of self-discovery). It is because the voiceover expresses reflective consciousness (time flowing backwards) that long before Tyler appears as a separate character, we have already seen what appear to be subliminal images of him. These flashing images (the first one appears on the screen when Cornelius goes to see a doctor about his insomnia, another one appears after Cornelius meets Marla for the first time) could be just Tyler's jokes (since he is telling the story and since he works as a projectionist, whose hobby is to insert precisely such subliminal pornographic images in family films), or they could function as an odd kind of foreshadowing, marking the point at which Cornelius starts inventing Tyler. They appear and disappear so fast, barely visible, because they represent Cornelius' unconscious. The different exposure of images (in terms of how long they remain on the screen) becomes a way to represent different levels of consciousness: well-exposed images suggest a well-developed consciousness, while the unconscious is expressed through short exposure. The more successful Cornelius is at suppressing his identity with Tyler, the more present Tyler becomes on the screen. On the other hand, as soon as Cornelius begins having doubts about his identity, Tyler becomes cinematographically invisible.

The splitting of the point of view challenges the distinction between real and virtual, a distinction that continues to be questioned on other levels as well, particularly on the level of 'natural' versus 'digital' images. While the opening credits are running, we see a computer-generated image of Cornelius' brain, and then the camera 'emerges' on the exterior surface of his head. The digitization of the internal (the images of the brain) continues on the level of what is, supposedly, the most individual, most personal or secret aspect of a human being: their thoughts. A series of digital, purposefully fragmented and fast, MTV-paced images is flashed on the screen, over which the same voiceover that was just a second ago accompanying the

2 In a passage reminiscent of Baudrillard's argument of the nature of the real—the real, Baudrillard believes, takes place only within a certain interval, at a certain speed of light, which makes possible the separation of causes from effects—Metz places film in-between theatre and photography, a sort of "optimal point...on either side of which the impression of reality produced by the fiction tends to decrease" (13). On the reality (not realism) constitutive of cinema, see particularly pp. 3-15 in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*. See also Fuery 123-128 on "the reality effect" in cinema. Fuery identifies the sense of reality created in cinema with the hyperreal i.e., with simulation.



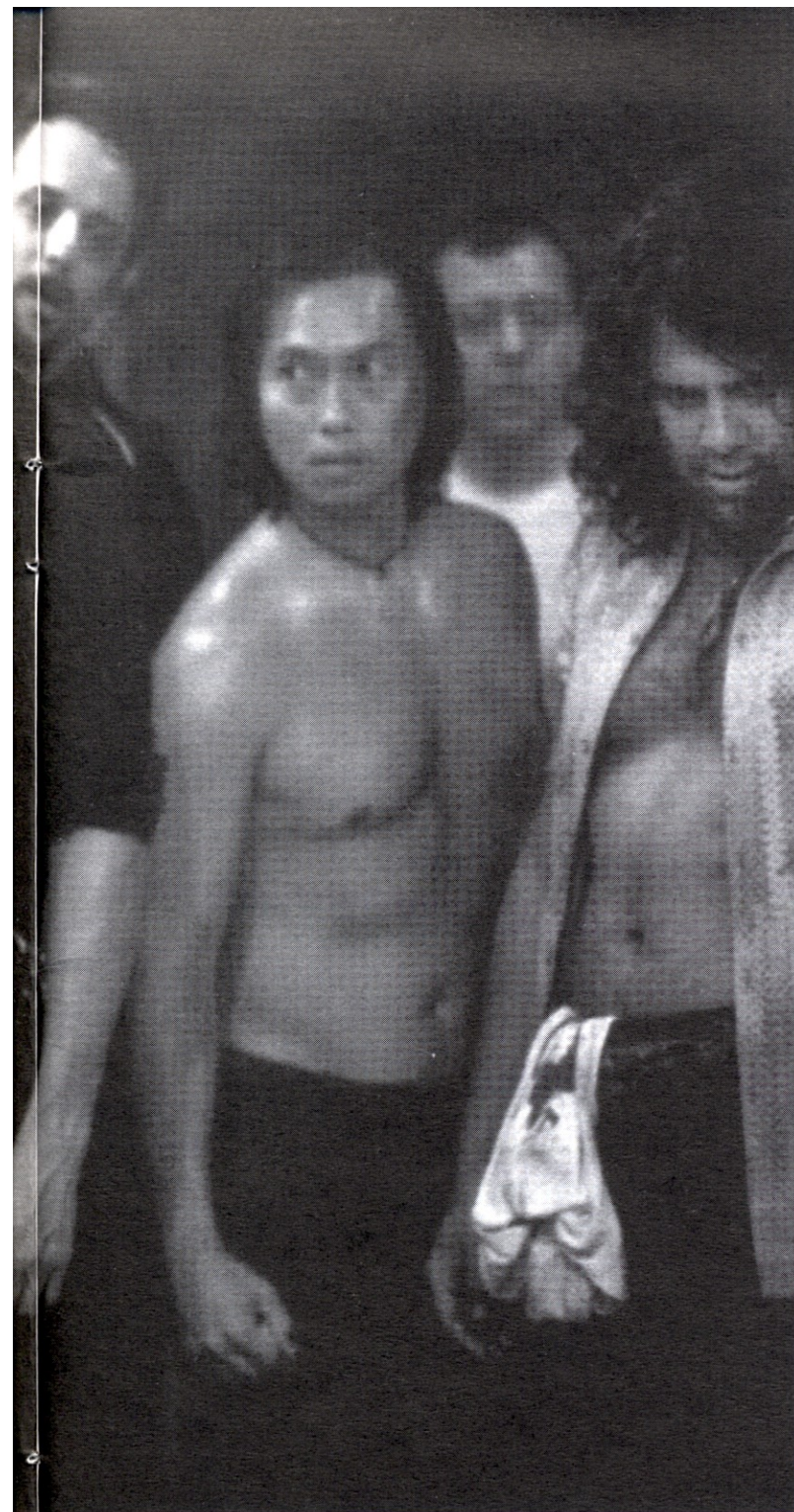


*Fight Club: Tyler (Brad Pitt) stripped for action.*

realistic scene of Tyler threatening Cornelius, is still superimposed. These artificial looking or even nonhuman images (they do not represent a human point of view—Cornelius's point of view—but the independent point of view of the camera) are meant to represent Cornelius' thoughts. This image sequence is all the more jarring since there is absolutely nothing to prepare us for it, no transition from the realism of the opening scene to the disturbing, almost hyperreal quality of the digitized images. The same voice we hear superimposed over the realistic images continues speaking over the digitized ones. From a Bergsonian point of view, the use of such digital images to represent 'internal' thoughts is, in fact, completely justified.

The digital images are less spatial in comparison to other, more realistic images. Rather, through their very speed they compress space and thus represent it in terms of time. In the opening scene, Tyler is standing by the window on top of a skyscraper; the camera moves 'through' the glass and then plunges down, reaches the ground, and falls further down into the basement where the van with the explosives is waiting. If this were shot realistically, at a normal speed, the sequence would have had to consist of separate shots taken at various points: either a camera would have to be placed on every floor of the skyscraper or the whole sequence would have to be divided into a shot from above, a shot at ground level, a shot





of the basement. A realistic effect would have been achieved only at the price of interrupting and fragmenting the time it takes the camera to move from one point to another. Since this particular sequence is supposed to express Cornelius's thoughts or memories—we know that from the voiceover recounting the plan of the Demolition Committee—a realistic treatment of his thoughts would have had to slow them down and “spatialize” them (to use Bergson's expression).

The advantage of the computer-generated image lies in its capacity to approximate (or simulate) the immediacy or the speed of Cornelius' thoughts. Thus, in this case, an artificial means of representation—digitization—represents time better

than a more realistic approach. It is precisely because the computer generated image is not interested in the meticulous representation of visual details that it speeds over them, creating the impression of being less extended, and instead more saturated with time. It could be objected, perhaps, that the mere speed of an image does not make it more of a mental image or an image of duration: after all, could not the same effect have been attained by merely editing together a series of very short images, alternating them very fast? There is a great difference between the two, however: a fast, computer generated image is continuous, but many images edited together create the impression of speed only by disrupting the continuity of what they are trying to represent. The very nature of editing is discontinuity: even when editing creates a unified impression or a certain mood, it still attains this through the discontinuity of multiple images. Computer generated images, on the other hand, are capable of imitating or simulating continuity or duration.

In addition to the distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘computer-generated’, the film also challenges the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical: it treats the metaphorical literally and the literal metaphorically. For instance, when Cornelius is advised to “step into his cave” (a metaphor for getting to know oneself, purposefully isolating oneself from the world), the camera actually shows us Cornelius, dressed in exactly the same suit he is wearing in real life, in a cave covered with ice. Conversely, later on, when he and Marla are having a conversation that threatens to precipitate Cornelius's realization that he is Tyler, Tyler (Brad Pitt) interrupts the conversation, addressing Cornelius from the basement: the unconscious, which is spatially envisioned as a realm *under* consciousness, is thus represented literally as a space *under* the rest of the house. Another instance of this tendency to treat the literal and the metaphorical as interchangeable is the director's choice to use a different actor to play the part of the imaginary Tyler. By making this decision, the director does not have to deal with the difficulty of using the same actor as two different people in one and the same shot (which would require a lot of editing). Instead, he treats the imaginary Tyler as just another image, as real as any other images. Conversely, when the imaginary Tyler ‘dies’ at the end of the film, he dies like a real person (we see the bullet make a hole in the back of his head). At the same time, however, the realistically depicted death of the imaginary Tyler remains metaphorical since Cornelius himself survives.

Even from a retrospective point of view, it is impossible to situate in time the moment when the real starts producing the unreal, the moment when Cornelius invents Tyler Durton. At first, it seems it must be the moment when Cornelius meets Tyler on the plane. However, the incident with the vibrating suitcase casts doubt on this hypothesis. Cornelius is stopped by airport security because of a suspicion that his suitcase might contain a bomb. It is irrelevant whether this is indeed Cornelius's suitcase or he and Tyler switched cases, because we know that they are the same person, hence there is only one suitcase. If there are indeed explosives in the suitcase, this means that Cornelius has been producing explosives from soap



well before we see him meet Tyler on the plane. In another instance, Cornelius is surprised when Marla calls him at the house on Paper street, but she tells him that he had given her the number himself. He gave her the number while he was still going to support groups, and *before* he met Tyler on the plane, *before* he blew up his own condo, which means that he must have been living in that house *before* he blew up his apartment. This lack of correspondence between the visual story and the voiceover is necessitated by the point of view of the film. Thus, there is a delay between the moment Cornelius' imagination externalizes Tyler as a separate human being and the actual moment when the split of Cornelius into two personalities takes place. But regardless of what moment in the film the director chooses to dramatize the appearance of Tyler (the split), Tyler will have always already appeared. The split cannot happen at exactly the moment in which we see it happen, because that would presuppose that Cornelius is conscious of it. The only way to suggest that something has happened, of which Cornelius is yet unaware, is precisely to present it as something that has already happened. Only if Cornelius is already Tyler *before* Tyler actually appears will the film make psychological sense, and it will make psychological sense only retrospectively. This psychological justification of the film is in accordance with Sartre's identification of the unconscious with the past, the given, the unself-conscious, that which already and simply is. The only way to present Tyler as Cornelius' alter-ego, of which Cornelius remains unconscious, is to present it as Cornelius's past, as something Cornelius already is, but to which he cannot be reduced.

It remains unclear, however, at what point the history of Cornelius' transformation from Cornelius into Tyler (history being a forward movement) slips into the retrospective account of this same transformation (i.e. what happens in the apparently linear sequence of events does not coincide with what must have happened retrospectively, since the invention of Tyler must always precede the visual dramatization of that invention). It is impossible to determine the point at which time flowing forward meets time flowing backwards, and history (events as they happen) becomes a story (events as they are said to have happened, the projection or recording of events); the point at which the present coincides with the past, or, put in yet another way, where an event is no longer an event but its own commentary on, or interpretation of, itself. The difficulty in differentiating between what is happening and what will have happened, between the naïve point of view of Cornelius and the self-conscious point of view of Cornelius=Tyler, whose flashback *includes* Cornelius's naïve point of view, is similar to the difficulty in distinguishing an original from a forgery, which Umberto Eco discusses in "Fakes and Forgeries." Eco observes that exactly the same verification procedures are used to establish the validity of both originals and forgeries. Not only do we have to establish that there exists somewhere an original, of which the forgery is an imitation, but we also have to establish that the original is indeed the original i.e., we have to prove that the original is not itself a forgery, which leads to infinite regress. The difference between an original and its forgery might be compared to that between

an objective and a subjective account of an event. Films like *Fight Club* and *Mulholland Drive* suggest that the difference between "what happened" and "what must have happened" can no longer be reduced to the neat opposition between "subjective" and "objective." We believe what we see are the events as Cornelius perceives them; at the end, we find out that what we saw was Tyler's version of what must have happened. *It is not a matter of confusing the objective with the subjective but of confusing two different levels of subjectivity*: within the subjective, we confused pre-reflective (Cornelius) with reflective consciousness (Tyler=Cornelius). In *Mulholland Drive* we believe we see events from Camilla's point of view and later we find out that what we saw was a mixture of Betsy's memories, nightmares, dreams: *we confuse one subjective point of view with another*.

Wim Wenders' *The Million Dollar Hotel* (2001), like *Fight Club*, splits the point of view between the point of view of the protagonist as a character in the film—a character, therefore, subject to the limitations of film or narrative time—and that of the voiceover, which is also the point of view of the already dead protagonist. Once again, *the visual aspect of the film does not correspond to the linguistic or narrative aspect* (the voiceover in which the point of view is embodied). We observe Tom-Tom (the protagonist) engage in the sort of activities typically associated with retarded people, but the voiceover does not belong to a retarded man: it is a sophisticated, self-aware voice capable of ironic asides (when Tom meets agent Skinner for the first time, the voiceover comments that Skinner realized pretty fast that Tom was a little slow in the head). The point of view is split not so much between the past when Tom was alive and the present when he is dead (still, whose present is it if he himself is no longer present?); rather, the necessity of the split is dictated by the different functions of the protagonist's point of view: whenever the point of view has to establish certain facts or provide some necessary information to the viewer, the voiceover sounds rational, coherent, self-conscious, and whenever the focus is shifted to character development, the point of view becomes that of an awkward retarded man with a tender heart.

Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2001) provides another instance of the purposeful incongruity between the visual element of the film and the point of view from which the story is told (the voiceover). The images in the film intentionally lag behind the story so that events that we see *later* in the film have actually happened *earlier*. Interestingly enough, the malfunctioning of the protagonist's memory is not used as an excuse for the film not to concern itself with consistency. In fact, precisely because there are no time anchors and events are fairly indeterminable, the film is extremely precise in the ordering of scenes. Even the kinds of foreshadowing used here and in *Fight Club* are similar: the subliminal images of Tyler (which retrospectively suggest the beginning of the splitting of the point of view) are matched by the equally subliminal substitution of the image of Sammy in the psychiatric asylum with the image of Leonard (which foreshadows the discovery that Leonard has confused his own life with Sammy's). As in the case of Tyler's double consciousness—at one level he knows he



has invented Tyler but at another level he believes Tyler is a real person—*Memento's* Leonard also lies to himself unconsciously. The film unfolds forward (despite the backward presentation of events) so that Leonard does not know (and we do not know either) the truth, but retrospectively we have to assume that Leonard knew and at the same time did not know the truth from the very beginning.

The epiphany is moved from the end of the film, where it usually belongs, to the beginning. In a less complicated film, the story starts out disordered and moves toward greater clarity, toward a single point that would retrospectively make sense of everything that has happened. It is important to notice that although this traditional type of narrative seems to rely on the most common notion of time as flowing forward, the truth is that in such a film time flows backwards insofar as all the events are governed by the same *telos* that will account for them retrospectively. The epiphany only appears to come at the end of the film, whereas in reality it has always already happened but is artificially delayed so that we can witness how the events led up to it. Time flows backwards, from a point in the future (the end of the film, the epiphany) back toward the past, imbuing events with their predetermined significance. Conversely, in a film that explicitly places its end in the beginning, the direction of time is reversed so that, counter-intuitively, time flows forward. Situating the epiphany in the beginning of the film has the effect of liberating the rest of the film from the need to follow a certain predetermined course. Thus, although it might seem natural to view time in the traditional film as a form of discovery—a movement from igno-

rance to knowledge—and, conversely, to regard time in the other kind of film (the film that starts from the end) as a reconstruction, in fact these two interpretations should be reversed: whenever the story moves forward, it is in fact reconstructing events in light of a predetermined end, and whenever the story moves backwards, it is in fact taking the form of discovery or exploration.

Placing the end at the beginning does not make the film predictable but in fact liberates it from predictability. When time unfolds forward in a film, the elements of the story that will be retrospectively important have to be given additional emphasis at the moment in which they are presented. Thus, even though while we are watching the film we are not supposed to know what is going to happen the next moment, we must nevertheless notice certain elements rather than others in order to understand the end of the film. The film must create the false impression that anything could be important (that the end cannot be known until we actually get to the end), but at the same time it must make sure that certain things are more important and more plausible than others (otherwise the film's end would seem arbitrary). On the contrary, a film that starts from the end does not have to show how all events contribute to the ending; cause and effect relationships are loosened up. This is particularly evident in Nolan's *Memento*. Given the foreknowledge of the end, one would expect the rest of the film to present clear cut causal relationships between events, but this is not what happens: although each sequence of scenes is clearly framed by beginning and end (the beginning of one sequence is the end of the previous one), what happens in-

*Fight Club*: Edward Norton, Brad Pitt.





between these two invariable, stable points is not always comprehensible and justifiable in terms of causes and effects.

The tricky nature of *Memento* lies precisely in the obvious way in which it flaunts its structure, seducing us into believing that once we have figured out the structure of the film we know everything and the only thing we can expect from the rest of the film is the backward unfolding of events until a beginning is reached. However, the point of view complicates things significantly. In the film's final scene, Leonard is driving down the road, thinking to himself: "I have to believe in a world outside my mind. I have to believe that when I close my eyes, the world is still there. Is it still there?...Yeah." Leonard has been and will continue to live in a world he has himself fabricated. His epiphany—the realization that he has been lying to himself—takes only a few seconds, during which he consciously decides to continue lying to himself, a decision he immediately forgets as he does everything else. Although the film tries to represent events exactly as Leonard experiences them—the film purposefully deprives itself of short-term memory to approximate its protagonist's condition—in reality this technique is inappropriate as it actually presupposes an exceptionally good memory. With every single scene recollected, Leonard has to 'leap' further and further back into the past in order to reconstruct the whole scene leading up to the beginning of the previous scene. This means that he has to 'leap' twice: once from the present into the past and the second time from a moment even further back in the past back to the first moment in the past.

Although visually the film's epiphany occurs at the end, on the level of narrative it happens in the beginning or rather in the middle insofar as the film has the structure of an infinite loop, without beginning or end. If the film were just an ordinary flashback, the epiphany would merely coincide with the origin. However, such an origin is inconceivable given that the protagonist is an unreliable narrator: deprived of short-term memory, he cannot tell (and neither can we) at what point he must have started lying to himself. Since there are two levels of consciousness in the film—Leonard's pre-reflective knowledge of what really happened, and, on the other hand, his ignorance/forgetfulness of what really happened—and since the former can exist independently of the latter (as Sartre has shown), it is impossible to determine the point at which the two consciousnesses diverge from each other, i.e. Leonard cannot remember the moment when he started lying to himself (which would be the real beginning of the film). Leonard cannot be conscious of the moment when he started forgetting (when he chose to forget) and lying to himself—if he were conscious, he would not have forgotten it. Memory is both the essential standard for determining what is real and what is not, and the least reliable standard for such a determination: on one hand, memory is selective and thus subjective but on the other hand, if one does not remember having done something, he is as likely to have done it as he is not to have done it, just as he could have done it five minutes or five years ago. Thus, when memory functions properly, it is an unrealizing (selective, imaginative force) but when it malfunctions, the distinction between real and unreal is suppressed (which implies,

paradoxically, that this distinction had always been precisely the work of memory).

*Memento* is structured like a flashback but it is not clear who is trying to remember what happened. Leonard's 'condition' places the film in an impossible situation: if Leonard has forgotten that he has already killed his wife's attacker, what is there to guarantee that he remembers killing Teddy? Since the events we see unfolding before us have already happened—Leonard has already killed Teddy—he must have already forgotten about it. But then whose flashback constitutes the film? Who remembers Teddy's murder and the events that led up to it, if it is not Leonard? It is not that Leonard, having killed Teddy in the first scene, is trying to reconstruct the series of events that led up to that murder: Leonard is merely trying to find his wife's killer; it is only 'the film itself' that is trying to 'remember' how he got to the point of killing Teddy. The point of view is split between Leonard's pre-reflective and reflective consciousness (in the same way it is split in *Fight Club*): it cannot be determined whether the story is told from the point of view of Leonard, who does not yet know that he will have killed Teddy, or from the point of view of Leonard who has *already* doubted himself for a moment after Teddy has told him the truth. Visually, Leonard's realization comes at the end, which suggests that the entire story must have been told from the naïve (pre-reflective) Leonard's point of view, but since from the very beginning of the film we already know that Teddy will have been killed, and since we have to follow the logic of the film (events happen backwards), the epiphany must be situated in the beginning, which would suggest that the whole story is told from the point of view of Leonard who knows (at least for a moment) that he has suppressed the memory of having killed his wife's killer and the memory of his wife's suicide.

Following, the film Christopher Nolan made before the more popular *Memento*, also employs the flashback technique (the protagonist is telling his story to a detective) accompanied by a voiceover, which problematizes the film's point of view. The point of view is, once again, split between the two visibly distinct personas adopted by the protagonist (he changes his appearance to look less like a thief, but at what point in time that happens remains unclear). Like *Fight Club*, *Memento*, *The Spanish Prisoner*, and *Open Your Eyes*, *Following* pursues a purposeful incongruity between the visual and the purely narrative (story) aspect of the film. This incongruity is not self-evident, revealing itself only retrospectively. For example, the film opens with the protagonist wandering in the streets and following different people, while the voiceover explains his reasons for doing so (boredom, loneliness). However, the end of the film makes it clear that the man the protagonist is following in the opening scenes, has actually been following him and, having gradually won his trust, uses him as a decoy to cover up his own criminal deeds. It is true that the subject matter of all these films justifies and perhaps even demands such a rift between images and story, insofar as all of these films deal with different forms of deception and self-deception.

It might seem, at first, that the linguistic element of these films (whether or not it is embodied in a voiceover) is privi-



leged over the visual element, which is eventually declared a source of deception. One might be led to believe that the narrative corrects the illusions created by the images, that truth is revealed exclusively by language (by the story). However, much more is demanded of the images than of the linguistic element of these films. Since each of these films must both deceive in a convincing fashion and reveal the deception in an equally convincing fashion, the visual representation of events must be so carefully orchestrated, so ambiguous—yet without seeming unconvincing—that when the film is seen *prospectively* the images would coincide with the story, but when seen *retrospectively*, the images would diverge from the original story and coincide with a different one (with the truth). In a sense, the images are expected to ‘carry out’ two different films at the same time: even after the deception has been revealed at the end, the revelation of the truth should not invalidate, retrospectively, the untruthful story the images have told.

The point of view in *Following* is as unreliable as that in the other films discussed here. The story is told as a flashback but it is intermingled with memories the protagonist must have imagined, since there is no way he could have witnessed them. (For example, he ‘remembers’ a conversation between two characters at which he was not present.) As in *Fight Club* and *Memento*, where it cannot be established whether or not the story is told from the point of view of the protagonist who has already become aware of his deception, in *Following* it appears at first that at the time of telling the story to the detective the protagonist (Bill) does not know that he has been deceived—the lack of chronology in the recounting of past events suggests that the person recounting them cannot yet make sense of them—but by the end of the film it has become obvious that the protagonist already knows quite a lot (although he is still unaware of the final twist, the murder of the woman he loves, he already knows that he has been deceived). As he is telling the story, Bill has already realized his deception, which means that the only purpose of the flashback is to reconstruct his way to that realization. The events are already ordered in a meaningful sequence in his mind but now he deconstructs their order to see how exactly he must have pieced them together. However, this becomes clear only retrospectively: while we are watching the film, we assume that the flashback is from the naïve, unknowing point of view. As in *Time Regained*, memory here works by leaps from one memory to another rather than by always going back to the present in order to leap into a particular moment in the past. One remembers always from within the past, not from a stable reference point in the present, which is why recollected events are never chronological: one can leap into an earlier memory and from there ‘remember’ an event that happened much later (remembering forward).

*Following* (*The Spanish Prisoner*, too, as we shall see) deals with deception, hence with representing the play between the different levels of knowledge among characters. In both films, once it becomes clear that events have been unfolding according to a plan (of which the protagonists were unaware), we are faced with the difficulty of distinguishing events that are part of the plan from those that are merely accidental. (For example, how could Carl have predicted that Bill would call him to

ask for advice about weapons, specifically about a hammer? Or why does the woman, who is supposedly working for Carl, tell Bill about the missing earring, raising his suspicion when he does not find it where it is supposed to be?) The discrepancies between the protagonist’s knowledge (with which we identify) and the knowledge of other characters have the effect of surrounding every event with the mysterious aura of self-sufficiency or inexplicability. The non-chronological representation of events creates the impression that every event we see has been preceded by another, very significant event that could explain it, but to which we are denied access. The focus is not on what happens but, rather, on what *could have* or *must have* happened before it: *something happens* means, first of all, that *something else happened before it*. For instance, we see Bill hiding a hammer under his coat, but we do not know why he is doing this until several scenes later. Although the film does not deal with the loss of short-term memory, it is structurally similar to *Memento* in the way it presents the effects of events *before* their causes. Events are either delayed or represented prematurely, in advance of our ability to comprehend them. And although Bill, unlike Leonard, has not lost his short term memory, there is something amnesic in the recounting of events: we never know what happened right before the particular event we see represented, as if Bill’s short term memory has been erased. Although it may appear counter-intuitive, the purposeful withholding of the causes of events emphasizes the fact that events are never accidental.

The treatment of time in *Fight Club* and *Memento* is intricately connected with the subject matter of both films, self-deception, and thus with point of view. All temporal complications and confusions result from the representation of two levels of consciousness—pre-reflective and reflective—and the various degrees of delay or coincidence possible between them. Although David Mamet’s *The Spanish Prisoner* (1998) is concerned with deception rather than with self-deception, it still poses some of the same questions the other two films deal with. In particular, it dramatizes the impossibility to determine the origin of a sequence of events even when, contrary to common sense, that sequence turns out to have been predetermined, as is the case with the confidence game called “The Spanish Prisoner.” The difficulty in distinguishing the real from the unreal in this film is already inherent in the misleading title: although the film provides a definition of “The Spanish Prisoner” confidence game, the protagonist does not fall victim to it but to an entirely different (and anonymous) confidence game. The protagonist is first tricked into believing that what he sees and experiences is real (his business trip to an exotic island where he unveils a secret “process” he has been working on). Later, he is led to believe that he has been tricked by means of an old confidence game, but his conmen lie to him that he has been tricked in order to trick him further into believing that they are going to protect him from the person who supposedly swindled him. They need him to believe that he has been conned so that they can con him. The film establishes something as real, then questions its reality, declares it unreal, and finally reaffirms its reality, without ever offering a stable reference point. For example, in the beginning



of the film the protagonist meets a woman who jokes that she is an FBI agent, implying that she is not. However, later he discovers (he is tricked into believing) that she is indeed an FBI agent. Finally, it turns out that she is not an FBI agent but merely pretends to be one (along with an entire fake FBI team). Thus, the protagonist is most successfully tricked when he is led to believe that when someone is lying they are actually telling the truth.

In *The Spanish Prisoner* (as well as in *Open Your Eyes*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Run, Lola, Run*), it is difficult to determine the point at which the confidence game begins, the point after which, retrospectively, we will have to assume that everything was part of a plan. Even if we acknowledge the cleverness of the conmen, it is hard to believe that everything that happens in the beginning of the film (on the island) has been planned. It seems incredible, for instance, that when the protagonist is leaving the island, his conmen know for certain that he will look back and see the "FBI agent" give his secretary her card, or that he will remember that the secretary made an album with memorabilia from the island and, further, remember that the FBI agent's card is in that album. On one hand, there are some carefully planted clues (the book, the flowers, etc.) that appear to be part of the confidence game since the conmen draw the protagonist's attention to them in a very obvious way, but, on the other hand, it is precisely these details that

end up raising the protagonist's suspicion. The film is structured as a confidence game within a confidence game, to which the false climax attests: the protagonist must be tricked into believing that he was tricked, he must become self-aware in order for his self-awareness to be put to sleep. He must believe that someone is lying to him, so that he can really be lied to. By drawing attention to itself, a lie does not simply uncover itself as a lie but in fact gains credibility. Even the end of the film, though seemingly solving the puzzle, cannot help us determine retrospectively the origin of the unreal, the point at which it started diverging from the real. That the whole series of events turns out to have been planned in advance, makes it not less but actually *more* difficult to distinguish retrospectively chance events from events that happen because they were planned. There is so much pressure to explain how every single detail was part of the plan, to make it fit into a strict causal relationship with every other detail in the story, that the more strongly the film insists that events were planned, the harder it is to reduce them to such a plan.

It is not so uncommon for a character in a film to realize that what he thought was real is, in fact, unreal. A film can get away with the wildest of dreams, fantasies, unrealities as long as there is still a point of view rooted in the real, even if it is not the dominant point of view in the film. In M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*, however, such a real point of view

*The Spanish Prisoner*: Campbell Scott and Deborah Pidgeon.





is lacking. The entire film unfolds (retrospectively) from an unreal point of view—at the end of the film the protagonist discovers that all that time he has been dead—and it dramatizes the process by which the unreal becomes aware of its own unreality. Thus, the only source of the real in the film is the mere realization that nothing of what we have seen has really happened, that it has been the imaginary experience of a dead man who refuses to believe he is dead. Though the events take up almost two hours of film time to unfold, in reality they are just the dream or hallucination of a man seconds before he dies. The real emerges only as its own self-negation, circumscribed on all sides by the unreal, just as in *The Spanish Prisoner* an unreal (fake) confidence game is framed by the ‘real’ confidence game. The uncovering of the unreal (the inner or fake confidence game) refers us only to something equally duplicitous (the outer or real confidence game). In both films the real is the result of the unreal flaunting its unreality: attaining self-awareness the unreal becomes real, just as a lie, by drawing attention to itself, passes for truth. The real remains suspect, nevertheless, since the unreal is not supposed to ‘know’ that it is unreal, while a lie is supposed to disguise itself rather than uncover itself purposefully.

The premise of *The Sixth Sense* is similar to that of *Fight Club*: the story is told from the point of view of an imaginary character, in this case a dead man and revolves around the protagonist’s ‘realization’ that he is dead. The film’s irony lies in the fact that the dead man is a psychologist trying to help a little boy, whose psychological problem consists precisely in his claim that he sees dead people. A year before the action in the film begins, the psychologist has been shot by a former patient of his, whom he treated when the latter was a little boy but whom he failed to cure. The boy, now a grown up man, returns to avenge himself on the psychologist he holds responsible. A year after he has been shot, the psychologist begins treating another boy, whose case is remarkably similar to the earlier one. This is the intriguing part: since the man who shot the psychologist was, twenty years ago (when he was the psychologist’s patient), suffering from the same “psychological disorder” as the new boy—he, too, saw dead people—it is conceivable that even at that time, twenty years ago, the psychologist was already dead. Of course, this is not what the film has tried to have us believe: at the end of the film, the psychologist realizes that he was shot and killed only a year ago, not twenty years ago. And yet, at one point in the film, while listening to a recording of the man who shot him, a recording dating back to the time when the man, still a child, was his patient, the psychologist hears for the first time the boy complaining that he is cold. Since the boy in the present (the second boy) also complains of being cold, it makes sense to suppose that if both boys respond in the same way to the psychologist and exhibit the same symptoms, then in both cases the psychologist must have been already dead. Thus, the film forces us to suspend all disbelief and believe not only that the present story (the second boy) is a dream recounted by a dead man, but to suspend all disbelief about the past as well and never to be certain whether the point of view character (the psychologist) was ever actually alive (real). It is difficult to say whether the film

achieves this level of indeterminacy of the point of view accidentally—that what I have pointed out here are just inconsistencies in the storyline—or the film purposefully refuses to establish the reality of the point of view. If the latter is true, the protagonist’s epiphany would be a doubly false epiphany: not only does the protagonist realize that he is dead, but he ascribes his death to the wrong moment in time since he must have been dead for twenty years, not for one.

Furthermore, what would be considered an abnormal and unreliable point of view—that of a psychologically troubled child who claims to see dead people—establishes the reality or unreality of another character’s point of view (the psychologist’s), whose reliability and reality we simply take for granted. And vice versa: the fact that the psychologist has been dead for a long time confirms the reality or authenticity of the boy’s visions, which would have otherwise remained groundless. *Thus, two aspects of the unreal derive their reality from their interdependence: the psychologist must be dead because the boy sees him, and, conversely, because the psychologist is dead, the boy must really see him i.e., he is not hallucinating.* There is not a single point of reference in the real against which to evaluate the unreal: although the psychologist realizes he is dead, his epiphany does not take us out of the unreal, does not return us to another, real world. That the psychologist eventually becomes conscious of his own death does not detract from the fact that he is just a vision in the mind of a troubled boy or a voice in his wife’s dream. How real could the epiphany of an unreal character be (unreal in the double sense of being dead and being a mere vision in a child’s mind)? Even when the unreal is recognized as unreal (or perhaps precisely when it is recognized), it is impossible to trace its appearance in real time. Thus, *since the unreal remains temporally indeterminate, it is as though the unreal has always already appeared.* In *The Sixth Sense* (as in all the films considered here) the point in time at which the unreal appears (the psychologist dies, turning into a vision in the boy’s mind) remains unknown: it could have happened a year ago or twenty years ago. In fact, the only ‘evidence’ we have of this man having existed at all is the wedding ring on his unreal/dead finger. To the extent that time fails to serve as a criterion on the basis of which we can distinguish the real from the unreal—the unreal does not have a beginning or end—time itself becomes unrealized. Metz posits *unrealization (irréalisation)* as constitutive of every narrative act. Regardless of how realistic a film is, “because it is perceived as narrated [it has] already been unrealized”(21). However, it is precisely the unrealization carried out by cinema that turns it into a kind of “natural signification,” to use Sartre’s words, or into a “form of perception”(28), to use Metz’s words.

Alejandro Amenabar’s *Abre Los Ojos* (*Open Your Eyes*, 1997) provides another instance of the derealization of time. The protagonist of this film, like *Memento*’s Leonard, is suspected of having concocted a story (feigning madness) to hide what he actually did (murdering his girlfriend). As in *Memento* and *Fight Club*, the moment when the real slips into the unreal is difficult to determine: just as Leonard cannot remember the moment when he chose to forget the truth, Cesar cannot remember the moment of “the splice” by means of which his



life has been prolonged into a waking dream, a virtual existence. The story is told (as in the other two films) as a flashback, or at least it seems that way: Cesar is in a psychiatric asylum in the presence of a psychiatrist who is trying to help him remember the events that led to his facial surgery and to his imprisonment. Retrospectively, the framework of the film is unreal since at the end of the film it turns out that the psychiatrist himself is just a part of Cesar's waking dream. Cesar's attempts to remember what really happened remain always framed by this unreality. Within this waking dream (the conversations with the invented psychiatrist), Cesar dreams of what really happened. There is a complete reversal of the usual hierarchy of living and dreaming: *Cesar is living a dream and dreaming about his real life*. Like the protagonist of *The Sixth Sense*, who realizes he has been dead for an entire year, the dreaming Cesar realizes he has been dead for 150 years.

A recurring motif in many of these films is the dream—supernatural (*The Sixth Sense*), futuristic (artificial perception or digital self—*Open Your Eyes*, *The Matrix*) or psychologically abnormal (*Fight Club*, *Memento*)—from which the protagonist must wake up. The real resurfaces in Cesar's consciousness whenever there are unpredictable errors in the waking dream program. Both in *Open Your Eyes* and in *The Matrix*, such errors are manifested in repetition: the suspicion arises that something in the matrix has been changed when Neo has a déjà vu; similarly, Cesar becomes aware of the malfunctioning of the computer program when the psychiatrist starts repeating words that Cesar has said in real life, before the accident. While the waking dream program does everything possible to conceal from Cesar the fact that he is living a dream, Cesar's unconscious is, from the very beginning, trying to become conscious by means of inventing the figure of the psychiatrist. By inventing the psychiatrist (Cesar did not kill his girlfriend, who simply died in the car accident; there is no murder and no trial and there is no reason for him to be in a psychiatric penitentiary) Cesar's unconscious incriminates itself insofar as the presence of such a figure presupposes that the person is hiding something from himself. Thus, by an odd gesture of doubling—the dream points to its own unreality by inventing the typical framework (psychiatrist—patient), within which dreams are analyzed—the unreal manages to reconstruct *imaginatively* the moment of its own appearance, the moment when Cesar was made to forget that he is dead. Although the film takes the form of a flashback—Cesar recounting his memories to the psychiatrist—it is only an imaginary flashback since in reality Cesar is not in a penitentiary and there is no psychiatrist. However, since the contract he signs with Life Extension (LE) offers him the opportunity to write the script for his own life, then everything that happens in the film must have been his choice, including the imaginary flashback he has in the presence of the imaginary psychiatrist. Thus, he is dreaming but at the same time he knows, perhaps pre-reflectively, that he is dreaming, and from the very beginning of the film he wants to wake up from the dream, which is why he invents the person most likely to help him wake up, a psychiatrist.

Since all events must have been invented by Cesar, it is as

though Cesar has unconsciously planned his awakening from the dream. Just as the unveiling of the confidence game in *The Spanish Prisoner* makes it difficult to distinguish between events that were part of the plan and absolutely chance events, since there are no criteria for determining the reliability or success rate of the Life Extension program, we have to assume that whatever happens, does so because it was part of the plan. Cesar begins breaking through the waking dream when one day (in the penitentiary, which is also a part of the waking dream) he happens to see a TV show on the topic of cryonics. The show triggers his memory—which is his only connection to the real—and eventually he is able to return to the LE office, where he is finally told the truth. Of course, since at that point he is still dreaming, the LE office must itself be part of his dream. Thus, the dream informs the dreamer that he has been dreaming. Since Cesar is in control of his virtual life, he must have *chosen* (planned) to hear that particular TV show: it is no accident but yet another unconscious attempt on his part to wake up. From the very beginning, then, he has been doing two mutually exclusive things at the same time: *he has been dreaming his life the way he wants it to be, but he has been, at the same time, creating all the necessary conditions for his eventual awakening*. Although he has absolute freedom—he is dreaming his life—he is unable to take advantage of it, because he does not know that he is in control of what he dreams. He can invent his life only at the cost of forgetting that he is inventing it: consciousness has the absolute power of manipulating reality only at the cost of remaining unconscious of its absolute power. The virtual can supplant the real completely only at the cost of collapsing the difference between the real and the virtual: the subject can never be aware that the virtual has supplanted the real. However, *Open Your Eyes* suggests that as long as there is a subject, absolute simulation (the complete supplanting of the real by the virtual) is impossible: the real ends up reclaiming its territory (even while he is still dreaming, Cesar already feels somewhat unreal, as if he instinctively knows that he is dreaming).

Although the point at which the dream has begun is specified—'the splice', Cesar learns at the end of the film, was made at the moment he wakes up in the street—the distinction between the real and the unreal is not at all clear visually. Thus, we cannot say that all the scenes before the moment of the splice represent real events, while all those following that moment represent Cesar's virtual life. The scenes with the (imaginary) psychiatrist appear early in the film and, in fact, they claim to be the reference point for all of Cesar's flashbacks. Even though we know, retrospectively, when the splice occurred, we are still unable to distinguish clearly the real from the unreal, because the whole film is determined by Cesar's point of view—a *virtual* point of view, since he is living a dream. That the origin of the unreal can be situated temporally (by determining the moment of the splice) means that it is still possible to subordinate the unreal to the *real* (to *real time*), but this does not change the fact that the whole story is told from a *virtual* point of view (the point of view of the waking dream, which has always already begun). It is inconceivable that the real can be (re)created from the virtual, that the wak-



ing dream can, by its own effort, lift itself up, *a la* Baron Munchausen, becoming aware of its own unreality. Despite the differences between *Memento* and *Open Your Eyes*—the protagonist of the former realizes just for a moment that he has been living in a dream only to return to that dream, whereas the protagonist of the latter chooses to end his virtual life—in both films *the distinction between the real and the unreal is established in the same way i.e., from within the unreal*.

The diverging of the real from the unreal *within* the unreal is analogous to the way in which recollection functions. To recollect one does not need to situate oneself in the present, 'leaping' back into the past until one 'hits' the right moment in time; rather, one always leaps from one memory to another, without necessarily leaping back to the present. Recollection does not require a stable reference point in the present since it is atemporal by nature or at least it functions in a time of its own, an imaginary time. Two very different films demonstrate this point well: Raoul Ruiz's *Time Regained* (1999) and Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* (1995). This is how Marcel, of *Time Regained*, recollects his past: rather than having a stable point of view in the present (Marcel on his dying bed) from which the story would leap back into different moments in the past, the film leaps from one recollection into another, moving forward and backward in time, deliberately producing such temporal inconsistencies or absurdities (but only from the point of view of a linear time) as, for instance, having an *earlier* memory serve as a point of reference for a *later* memory. For example, in one scene the adult Marcel is reading a letter from Gilberte, in which she tells him about the war. On the screen we see *both* the adult Marcel and the young boy Marcel standing behind a film camera, projecting a film about the war which, from the boy's point of view, has not happened yet. Thus, the child Marcel is *remembering forward*. Since the camera moves from one memory to another, without going back to the present, the point of view is multiplied indefinitely: there is not a single privileged point of view from which recollection begins. The point of view of each memory is simply the point of view of the memory that came before it, and since the order of memories is never predetermined, there is never a point of view to which all memories are subordinated.

The lack of a privileged point of view is further reinforced by the superimposition of images representing different memories. If a certain recollection lacks clarity, the camera does not attempt to 'correct' it by returning to the present in order to go back to that memory again; instead, those parts of the recollection that appear incoherent are rendered 'readable' by means of reconstructing older memories, thereby creating a context against which the problematic memory is then repeated (usually different parts of it). In other words, one recollects better by expanding the field of recollection behind the particular memory, exploring older recollections, and then moving from those older recollections to the original one. *The past can be understood only through the past, not through the present*. The revitalizing power of memory manifests itself cinematographically: in the scenes representing Marcel's recollections, there is a profusion of light flowing from the back of the scene, making the contours of the recollected human figures stand out. By

contrast, every time the camera returns to the present, to the room in which the old Marcel lies dying, there is barely any light, and Marcel himself is hardly visible lying on the bed. In general, the older the memory, the more light there is in its visual representation. The use of light supports my earlier claim that a certain memory is better understood, and more clearly recalled, by throwing more light on memories that are even older than it rather than by throwing more light on the present. Further, flashbacks are embedded in one another rather than proceeding in an ordered sequence from the present. The mutual embeddedness of multiple and various recollections is illustrated by their visual coexistence on the screen. For example, we see the adult Marcel walking in the street, then freezing in his steps, as the little boy Marcel passes him by, accompanied by his mother. The two Marceles, obviously belonging to two different recollections, go to church where a third Marcel, emerged from yet another memory, observes them.

The representation of the work of memory in *Time Regained* illustrates Deleuze's idea of a "crystalline regime of images" (*Cinema II*) in which images are not subordinated to a single privileged image but all images reflect one another indiscriminately. Memory seems to exemplify best what Bergson and Deleuze believe to be the nature of our mental life: the irreducibility of any single experience to a cause or to another experience. Recollection is not an act by which a certain, definite subject communicates with his past which is somehow outside him, but a process in which multiple recollections communicate with one another. If the subject is defined as a certain unity persisting in real time, a time whose direction is determined by the difference between past and future, then the time of memory is imaginary time. Whereas in real time the present is the privileged point of view determining all other points of view, in imaginary time the point of view can be anywhere. Because of this flexibility of the point of view in recollection, recollections appear imprecise or distorted. It is a common belief that our memories are partly recollected and partly imagined. Imagination is typically associated with untruth or falsity. However, our recollections are 'imagined' not in the sense that they are distorted versions of what actually happened; rather, since our recollections are not dominated by a certain point of view, they allow time to flow in any direction. 'Truth' is a notion derived from one privileged dimension of time, the present, and is therefore applicable only to the present. A memory cannot be 'true' or 'false' in the traditional sense of these terms. The imaginary time of recollection is not a false or unreal time: it is as real as the time by which we live our life in the present, but it accommodates things and events that would be considered 'impossible' or 'false' in what we call 'real time'.

That recollection takes place from within the past, not from a point in the present, reveals the *self-referentiality, self-reflexivity*<sup>3</sup> or *self-sufficiency of events in imaginary time*. An event that happens in imaginary time does not need to be referred to some outside point of reference that would ascribe credibility or meaning to it; the event creates its own time and is meaningful in itself. When recollecting, one is always already in the



past. Films like *Fight Club*, *The Sixth Sense*, *The Spanish Prisoner*, *Open Your Eyes*, *Mulholland Drive*, *Memento*, and *Following* are well aware of this, which is why they necessarily fail to locate the specific point in time (in the film) when the real and the unreal, or the present and the past, begin diverging from each other. In a sense, these films do not have a beginning or they begin, following Aristotle's advice, *in medias res*. Such a strategy remains faithful both to the real and the unreal, refusing to reduce either one to the other. The unreal is not simply decreed from the real, but neither is the real a mere side effect of the unreal. The two do not originate in some common source; rather, their difference is always already there, which also guarantees their co-existence. The difference between imaginary time and real time is clarified by Marcel's reflections on the atemporal nature of memory. Contrary to common sense, Marcel observes, memory does not open up the gates of time but carries us beyond time. Marcel is not afraid of death because, he explains, the moment he recalls the taste of the madeleine he has already become extra-temporal. The past is preserved not within the subject, who is himself a temporal being, but in a realm beyond subjectivity, hence beyond time. Not only does memory not have a beginning: it does not have an end either. Time itself is finite, but memory, which surrounds time on all sides, is eternal. It is misleading to speak of eternity as a characteristic of time, as if to produce eternity all we had to do is 'stretch out' time. Eternity is not just 'a longer time': time and eternity differ in kind.

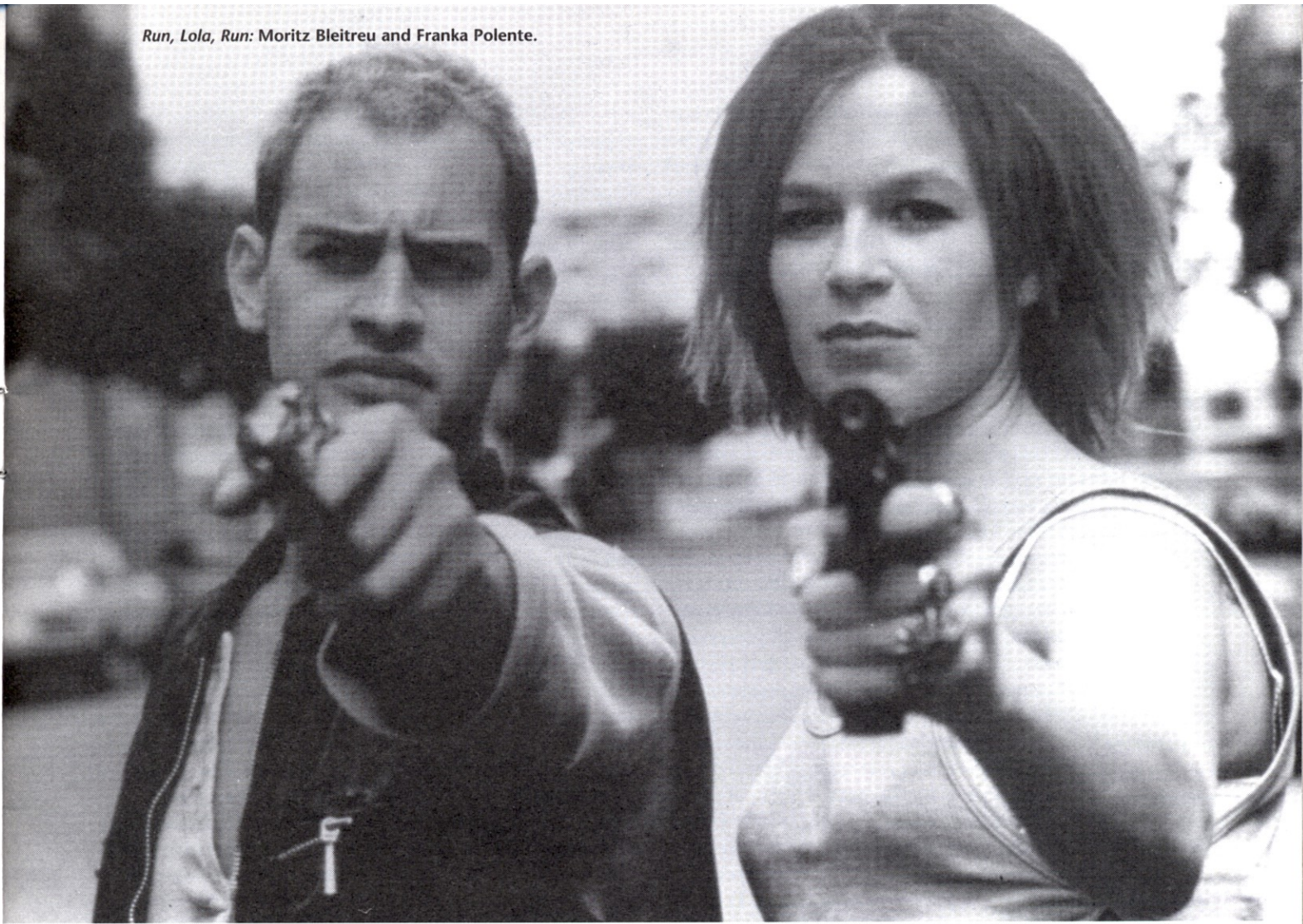
*12 Monkeys*, like *Time Regained*, represents the intertextuality of memory. James (the protagonist) is sent from the future back to 1990 and 1996 with the mission of tracing the path of a virus that has already wiped out almost the entire human race. From James' point of view, the present (to which he is sent back) has already happened and he is reliving the past (which for the people of 1990 and 1996 is the present). James' experience of the past differs significantly from that of the people of 1990 and 1996; this becomes clear when James is sent, by mistake, to the wrong year and he finds himself in the trenches of World War I. From the point of view of someone for whom 1996 is the present, WW I would be the past, but from the point of view of James who possesses foreknowledge, the past is shaped by the future. His presence in the trenches of WW I changes the past and is figured in the historical books and photographs of that period. In a lecture delivered in 1996, James' photograph appears in a slide from WWI. Had he not been sent back to the wrong year by mistake, he would have never appeared in the historical records of that period. His sudden appearance therein suggests that the future actually determines what part of the past will have become as important as to be believed to have happened at all. While attempting to argue that the past is not dead but is constantly shaped and reshaped by the future, the film continues to rely on the universal assumption that the present is more real than the past. On several occasions, James observes that the human mind is not meant to exist in two dimensions (the present and the past) simultaneously, because then it cannot tell the real from the unreal. But since James himself exists simultaneously in the present and in the past, it cannot be established with certainty

that he is indeed a man sent back from the future or simply a madman. While he can certainly predict events, because from his point of view they have always already happened, he often wonders whether he is dreaming or imagining that he has been sent from the future, whether he is really insane and the people who supposedly sent him back to the past are just figments of his mad imagination.

Compared to David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, the story of *12 Monkeys* appears as simple and transparent as can be. Only towards the end of Lynch's film do we realize that the events in the film lack any sort of temporal unity and are, in fact, the invention of a mad woman. The temporal discontinuity of events is mainly due to the fact that the film purposefully does not distinguish between several different psychological experiences: dream, memory, and wishful thinking or imagination. While wishful thinking is usually directed towards the future, memory is always directed towards the past (a dream can be directed either towards the future or towards the past). To treat them as equivalent means to treat the future and the past as equivalent. For instance, when we see Camilla almost killed, we do not know whether Diane (the protagonist) is remembering or imagining (wishing) this. Since Diane's point of view is not anchored in the present, the past or the future, she could be (1) imagining Camilla's death, (2) remembering how she was imagining it, (3) remembering it now, in the present, (4) wishing for it from the past, (5) wishing for it from the present, and so on.

The film starts with Diane's memory/dream and ends with an account of the real events that occasioned Diane's dream. Since Diane's death happens within the dream and the dream equivalent of Diane, Betty, survives it—the dream continues—Diane's suicide at the end does not seem that final or convincing: we do not know that it is the real death of the real Diane or just another psychotic episode, a memory or a dream. Many of the events and characters that we have seen in the dream part of the film reappear in the reality part and vice versa. For example, we see Diane dead in her dream/memory, and we eventually see her commit suicide in reality. Another instance of this doubling, of the same event happening in two worlds, is the car ride with which the film opens (but this repetition becomes obvious only retrospectively, after the second time it happens). The first car ride is Diane's dream: she imagines/dreams about Camilla's murder, which later will turn out to have been planned by Diane herself. The second car ride, which we see in the realistic part of the film, is a memory of what actually happened one night, a memory after which the dream car ride is obviously modeled. The failure of Diane's plan starts the dream, whose purpose is to explain (by confusing us) how we got to that point, what in reality motivated Diane to want to kill Camilla. The real question is this: When does Diane's dream begin? From a logical point of view, she cannot start dreaming it before she meets the gunman, for example, and yet we see the dream long before that. As in *Open Your Eyes*, where the dream has always already begun (even before the splice has occurred), here too the dream visually precedes its place on the temporal storyline. The nature of the dream demands that it be impossible to determine the origin of the dream since if that were possible, the person would no longer





be dreaming but would wake up. Because Diane cannot be conscious of the fact that she is hallucinating or dreaming, the film cannot be aware of it either and has to disguise the point at which the dream begins. The distinction between subjective and objective vanishes:

We run in fact into a principle of indeterminability, of indiscernibility: we no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental, in the situation, not because they are confused, but because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to ask....already, when Robbe-Grillet provides his great theory of descriptions, he begins by defining a traditional 'realist' description: it is that which presupposes the independence of its object, and hence proposes a discernibility of the real and the imaginary. ...Neo-realist description in the nouveau roman is completely different: since it *replaces* its own object, on the one hand it erases or *destroys* its reality which passes into the imaginary, but on the other hand it powerfully brings out all the reality which the imaginary or the mental *create* through speech and vision. (Deleuze, *Cinema II* 7)

The neo-realist description achieves

a vision which is purely optical. ...The event is no longer confused with the space which serves as its place, nor with the

actual present which is passing....[A] time is revealed inside the event, which is made of the simultaneity of these three implicated presents, from these de-actualized peaks of present. ...An accident is about to happen, it happens, it has happened; but equally it is at the same time that it will take place, has already taken place and is in the process of taking place; so that, before taking place, it has not taken place, and, taking place, will not take place...etc. (100)

By 'purely optical vision' Deleuze means the representation of an event as absolutely self-sufficient, unburdened by a context i.e., by other events that serve as causes or effects. These are the characteristics of Deleuze's time-image (or the mental image<sup>4</sup>), the image that exists for its own sake only, not to further the plot or as a necessary part of characterization. Such an image, devoid of any purpose or end, can no longer be classed as 'real' or 'unreal' since it is both: the event it represents could have

3 Fuery analyzes instances of excessive self-reflexivity in cinema—those elements of a film, which belong both inside and outside the cinematic frame—using the Derridean model of the *parergon* (borrowed from Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*). See Fuery pp. 152-157. One of the examples of the *parergon* Fuery provides—what he calls "excesses of time of the film"(155)—is an appropriate description of Deleuze's time-image. The *parergonal* model could prove useful in studying time and point of view paradoxes in the films discussed in this chapter. In fact, Fuery claims that "all elements of cinema...can be imbued with the quality of the frame, and hence *parergon* and liminality"(157).



happened but it could have just as well not happened. It is in this sense that Deleuze argues that the event will take place, has taken place, and is taking place, all at the same time. *Mulholland Drive* is a perfect example of “purely optical vision”: because events are decontextualized, presented without any explanation, what has taken place precedes what will take place, or what will take place precedes what is taking place.

What makes the films discussed so far interesting is that they tell two stories simultaneously, usually two stories opposed to each other: either the images tell one story and the voiceover tells a different story or, if there is no voiceover, at a certain point in the film there is a sudden shift in the point of view or a sudden revelation of the real nature of the point of view. However, the discrepancy between the purely visual and the narrative aspect of the film and the sudden changes in the point of view never have a corrective function. Even when the particular discrepancy is explained, it does not retroactively negate that which has caused the discrepancy i.e., images are not less ‘true’ than the story they contradict nor is the story less ‘true’ than the images it contradicts. Thus, even what might be considered ‘gimmicky’ films (such as *Memento*) leave us with a sense of indeterminacy (indeterminacy of time and of point of view).

While also concerned with the theme of time—particularly with the distinction between accident and destiny, repetition and singularity—Tom Tykwer’s films tend to affirm the singular or the *absolute* nature of events. An event is absolute if it is absolutely determined or carrying the highest degree of significance. Sissi, the protagonist of *The Princess and the Warrior* (2001) wants to find out if what happens to her—she is hit by a truck but a stranger saves her life—is merely a coincidence or fate. The film represents events as destined not in the sense of predetermined by the filmmaker but destined in a *quasi-mythic* or even metaphysical way. Thus, at a crucial moment in the film, Sissi tells another character (a bank guard who is about to shoot the stranger who saved her life): “You can’t shoot now. This is not part of the plan.” Sissi appears to be addressing the filmmaker himself, commanding him not to ‘make’ the bank guard shoot because this would not be part of the destiny she believes she is uncovering. At that moment, the film’s subject matter (Sissi’s belief in destiny) seems to determine what will happen. The protagonist appears to be writing the film rather than being a puppet manipulated by the filmmaker. Of course, even this impression of the protagonist’s absolute freedom has been planned: namely because the subject matter of the film is destiny can the protagonist create the impression that even the film itself is part of that *quasi-mythic* destiny. Destiny works on two levels simultaneously: as subject matter and as meta-narrative (a comment on the making of the film, on the purposeful representation of events as destined).

The Tykwer’s 1999 hit *Run, Lola, Run* opens with the following quotations:

“We shall not cease from exploration.  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.”  
(T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”)

“After the game is before the game” (S. Herberger)

The first quotation is concerned with the idea of habituation and defamiliarization: the first time we are involved in something we do not yet fully realize the significance of that involvement because we do not yet know ourselves. On one hand, then, the quotation is about the acquiring of reflective knowledge: at the end of the process we know something about ourselves that we didn’t know before. On the other hand, however, we can acquire that knowledge only by returning to our starting point. The quotation implies that what matters most in our search for an answer to the question we have asked is to know what made us ask the question in the first place (hence “knowing the place for the first time”). The film presents three versions of the same storyline—Lola trying to find money for her boyfriend in 20 minutes—a technique both Bergsonian and anti-Bergsonian. On one side, the kind of repetition the film deals with illustrates the existence of something like ‘pockets’ of virtuality, from which are released infinite variations of the storyline, depending on the point in time we select. However, the division of the 20 minutes each loop takes up into specific points, which act as origins for the variations, is completely un-Bergsonian in nature. The film portrays time as the continuous creation of the new but, at the same time, it attributes each variation to a specific moment in time: the first time Lola runs into the woman pushing a stroller, we see the woman’s life in a sequence of snapshots, but the second time she runs into her (at a different moment since the repetition, as we shall see, is delayed) we see the woman’s life in a different sequence of snapshots. From a Bergsonian point of view, the film seems to be reducing the new to a specific origin. After all, if a certain sequence of events is possible only at one particular moment and impossible at any other moment (at another moment a different kind of variation is possible) the new can be predicted: as long as we know at what moment Lola will run into the woman, we already know the kind of life the woman will have had (in fact, we can rewind the tape as many times as we like, and every time we will see the exact same sequence at this particular moment).

The second quotation with which the film opens—“After the game is before the game”—merely complicates the problem of the new. The quotation implies that there is no qualitative difference between the end of an event and its beginning, that everything that happens after the event has, in a sense, already ‘happened’ before the event, the event being merely the externalization or realization of what was already given. In Bergson’s terminology, the event is regarded as a mere possibility, which is then actualized, rather than as a virtuality, which can never be given in advance. This quotation posits that what we know after the game, we already knew before the game: the game itself was possible precisely because we knew what the game would bring, though it was a kind of unreflected knowledge. Thus, the only difference between *before* and *after* the game is the level of reflective knowledge attributable to them: these are not two different moments but the second moment merely manifests what was already latent in the first moment. This



kind of model—the model of *the possible* as what exists first in order to be manifested or actualized later—does not leave place for the new (if we follow Bergson). In fact, the first quotation suggests something very similar as it situates the new not at the end of an event but at the beginning, a beginning to which we return: again, it is a matter of acquiring higher degrees of reflective knowledge.

*Run, Lola, Run* suggests that the new does not happen before (or unless) it is repeated. Hence a definition: *the event is that which happens twice*. This view of repetition is not entirely without precedent. In *Repetition* Kierkegaard argues that our entire life must be brought before us so that we attain the elasticity of “a genuine repetition...recollected forward” (131). Contrary to common opinion, repetition is not the reification of life but the very emergence of life: “When the Greeks said that all knowing is recollecting, they said that all existence, which is, has been; when one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence” (149). Life precedes itself: it is actual but it is not really ‘noticed’; it is not ‘lived’ unless it is repeated. Life appears by withdrawing from itself, repeating itself. The new cannot appear before it is repeated and then it appears precisely because it is repeated, “for the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new” (149).

The idea that an event really happens only after we have become conscious *that* it happens—i.e., after it has been repeated—presupposes that we can distinguish, within the structure of the event, two ‘stages’ or ‘modes’ of the event: the mere *happening* of the event and the fact *that* it happens (our reflective consciousness of the event). The pure event is merely a useful hypothetical notion, similar to the Sartrean notion of a pre-reflective consciousness: in reality, the event does not happen unless we are reflectively conscious that it happens. The general thrust of the two quotations introducing *Run, Lola, Run* is this: admittedly, things happen independently of us, but, at the same time, nothing happens unless we know that it happens. The difference between two moments in time—for example, between the beginning and the end of an event—is ‘measured’ in terms of the level of reflective consciousness we attain. The more reflectively conscious we are of an event, the more real it is. It is almost as if time is possible at all only because we are never conscious of events the first time around. If we were always already conscious that something is happening, time would not exist (since time is precisely the difference or delay between pure event or pre-reflective consciousness and reflective consciousness). Put differently, the existence of time ‘proves’ indirectly the reality of pre-reflective consciousness, the non-coincidence of events with the reflective consciousness of them. This notion of time as embodied in various levels of consciousness (consciousness as various modes—contractions and expansions—of time) is Bergsonian in nature insofar as it construes all our experience as a form of *déjà vu*. It is important to clarify that the argument that what makes time possible is the difference between pre-reflective and reflective consciousness does not suggest that time is merely subjective. Both Bergson and Sartre believe that pure memory (Bergson) or pre-reflective consciousness (Sartre) do not belong to subjectivity. Time is the difference between an event and our reflective consciousness of

it, but since pre-reflective consciousness is not outside us but constitutive of us, time is not outside us either. Time is neither a subjective creation, nor an absolutely objective realm independent of us. Time ‘consists’ of pure events (pre-reflective consciousnesses) and their repetitions (reflective consciousnesses, causes and effects).

When Lola runs into different people, we witness repetition. Despite the fact that she is always following the same route and running into the same people, in the same order, this is not a repetition of the same, because every time she is a little bit late. This slight delay is reflected in the different kinds of lives we see attributed to the people she runs into three times. Her meetings with these people constitute a paradoxical combination of pure accident and destiny. On one hand, the kind of life (presented as a super-fast sequence of snapshots that are almost incomprehensible unless watched in slow motion) unfolding in the case of each person she meets appears absolutely accidental (one variation seems no more necessary than the others), but, at the same time, it is precisely because Lola runs into a person at a specific moment that only one of their infinite possible lives is represented. Anything could happen (time is infinity and unpredictability of variations) but, at the same time, at a particular point in time only one thing happens. Had there been no delay, had Lola run into other characters at the exact same moment every time, the fact that every time we see different sequences of snapshots would have to mean that at each particular moment in time there is an infinite number of possibilities, of which only one is realized. However, the idea that each moment ‘contains’ infinite variations fails to explain why one of these possibilities is actualized rather than any of the others. On the other hand, the introduction of a delay in the repetition allows for a more radical notion of freedom. It is not true that anything is possible at any moment. “Now” is not indeterminate: what happens ‘now’ is no longer possible at another moment. We are used to thinking of repetition as superimposing itself exactly over what has already happened once. Paradoxically, the only way to show that repetition is never the exact repetition of the same but in fact the production of the new is to introduce a slight delay while still keeping the structure of repetition.

*Run, Lola, Run* is not concerned with enumerating possibilities. In this, the film is faithful to Bergson’s distinction between the possible and the virtual. The possible precedes and is exhausted by the real in which it is actualized. The model of time according to which moments are made up of infinite variations

4 The crisis of the action image is marked by the appearance of a new kind of image Deleuze calls “mental image.” Deleuze lists five major characteristics of the mental image. First, “the image no longer refers to a situation which is globalising or synthetic, but rather to one which is dispersive. The characters are multiple, with weak interferences and become principal or revert to being secondary” (*Cinema I* 207). Second, “[I]nterconnections, connections, or liaisons are deliberately weak. Chance becomes the sole guiding threat. ... Sometimes the event delays and is lost in idle periods, sometimes it is there too quickly, but it does not belong to the one to whom it happens...” (207). Third, “the sensory-motor action or situation has been replaced by the stroll, the voyage and the continual return journey...It [the action] happens in any-space-whatever...in opposition to action which most often unfolded in the qualified space-time of the old realism” (208). Fourth, the only thing that provides any kind of consolidation or ‘totality’ are clichés (psychological clichés as well as clichés determining a certain time period) (208). Fifth, the plot is no longer important (209).



expresses best the idea of the possible: the possible is never absolute because anything else could have happened in its place. On the contrary, the virtual is what will have been possible but which is never already given. We cannot predict the differences that will 'result' from the fact that Lola is a little late every time. These differences (the different snapshot sequences) are not already given as possibilities for each of the secondary characters; rather, each character's life differs from itself. To say that a moment contains multiple possibilities is merely to stretch out the moment while still positing its identity with itself. The new is not produced from multiple (even infinite) possibilities.

At first, the extremely fast, carefully edited sequence of snapshots (accompanied by the unmistakable sound of a photo camera) may seem as a severe disturbance of the inner continuity of Bergsonian time. However, the editing together of a series of photographs, although it seems to divide time into frozen frames, remain faithful to the Bergsonian notion of consciousness as existing at various levels of condensation (contraction) and dilation (expansion). It is impossible to tell which of the snapshots of the woman with the stroller belong to her future and which to her past: some of them seem to explain how she stole the child, while others appear to refer to her future (the shot of the social workers taking away the child). The question is whether these are the memories and fearful anticipations of the woman herself (which would justify the visual condensation technique as the best approximation to the condensation work of memory), or they do not reveal the woman's consciousness but only that of the camera.

It is necessary to present the different lives of these secondary characters because they illustrate the different outcomes of Lola's run as a result of her delay. The only difference between Lola and the other characters is that the film has bestowed upon her the privileged status of a protagonist. Nevertheless, one can very well imagine condensing Lola's three runs into three snapshot sequences and expanding the condensed three versions of the secondary characters' lives into an entire movie. Since every time Lola runs into one of these characters nothing else changes (except the sequence of snapshots), and since the delay each time is so insignificant, we can assume that were we to carry this experiment to an extreme—shrink the delay to zero, which would mean that Lola will run into the woman every time at the same moment—even then the moment she runs into the woman every time would be different. *The delay is necessary not to demonstrate that different things happen at different times, but that each moment differs from itself.* Difference does not happen between moments; rather, each moment differs from itself.

The only difference between the snapshot sequences of the secondary characters' lives and the different scenarios of Lola's meeting with her father and his lover seems to be that whereas the possible lives of the secondary characters are maximally condensed, her meetings with her father are dramatized, elaborated, expanded, in general treated cinematically, as a story within a story, whereas the lives of the secondary characters never become narratives but remain only a series of photographs. However, there is another, more essential difference between these expansions and condensations of the characters' lives in time. There is no reason to believe that it is because Lola runs

into the people in the street at different points in time that we are presented with different possible scenarios of their future and past lives i.e., Lola's delay does not *cause* the differences in their futures/pasts. Thus, we have to read these incidents metaphorically or symbolically. We are faced then with two possible (and opposite) interpretations: either these incidents suggest, in an intentionally exaggerated manner, that the smallest accident has the gravest significance (destiny) or, on the contrary, that everything that happens is purely accidental (in that case, the incidents undercut their most obvious meaning, the assumption that there is a causal relationship between all of them). The film never really demonstrates a preference for one of these two alternatives, but oscillates between fate (only one event is possible at a given moment in time) and pure chance (any event is possible at any given moment in time). This is not the case with Lola's meetings with her father, however, whose purpose is to affirm the reality of fate. It is precisely because Lola arrives at the bank a little later every time, and interrupts the conversation between her father and his lover at different moments, that she ends up with different pieces of information on the basis of which to act (significantly, the last time she is so late that she is 'lucky' enough to miss her father and is thus spared the painful discoveries of the previous two meetings: that her father is not her real father and that he is thinking of leaving his family to marry his lover). Thus, this aspect of the storyline suggests that at a specific moment of time only one outcome is possible.

The transition scenes between the first and the second, and between the second and the third run might be a clue that these two runs that seem to end tragically are not real (perhaps they are the worst case scenarios Lola imagines before she even starts running) and that they have mostly a symbolic meaning (they are a sort of a test of Lola's relationship with Mani). However, the third run is not structurally different from the other two and does not seem more necessary or real as an outcome. In fact, the third run seems the most unlikely or the most accidental in its happy outcome: the only reason Mani is able to pay the drug dealers on time is that the blind woman standing in front of the phone booth tells him to wait, and it is exactly at that moment that he sees the bum with the bag of money pass him on a bike. Even the way in which this third time (the third time is always the happy one in fairy tales) Lola finds the money—winning at a casino—stresses the accidental nature of the happy ending.

That the third run might be just a clever manipulation of the story so as to produce the desired happy ending is clear from what seems to be the film's deliberate failure to take into account the delay from the first and second run and the necessary changes that ought to have resulted, in the third run, from that delay. Although some of the secondary characters are treated consistently—e.g. we see yet another possible life of the woman with the baby stroller—the stories invented for other characters are clearly manipulated so as to produce the desired happy outcome: the man on the bike 'accidentally' meets the bum who still has the bag with the money; the bum buys the bike from the man; the blind woman waiting in front of the phone booth tells Mani, who is about to leave, to wait thus giving him a chance to notice the bum riding the bike past them.



And most important of all, the problem with Lola's father is solved because she misses him and never finds out that he is not her father or that he has a lover. The father himself is spared his lover's confession that she is pregnant with someone else's child, because just when she is about to confess, he gets a phone call and has to leave.

There is an obvious temporal inconsistency between the third happy version of the story and the previous two. The first time, the conversation between the father and his lover is interrupted when she tells him she is pregnant; the second time it is interrupted a little later (since Lola is running late, which delays all other incidents as well), when she admits that she is pregnant with someone else's child and a fight between them ensues; the third time, the conversation *should have been interrupted still a little later*, perhaps during the fight or after it, but instead the scene is *moved back in time* and Lola's father does not even hear that his lover is pregnant with another man's child. Thanks to this manipulation of time, Lola arrives at the bank too late and 'luckily' misses her father (even though the previous two times she was on time despite the fact that she was running late). The red ambulance sequence is manipulated in a similar way. The first time, the red ambulance stops abruptly in front of a huge sheet of glass a few workers are carrying across the street; the second time, since Lola is running late, the ambulance fails to stop and goes through the glass; the third time, the event is *moved back in time* and the ambulance never goes through the glass. Instead, Lola gets in the car and magically saves the life of the dying man lying inside.

In general, the problems caused by the delay during the second run are solved by the purposeful manipulation of what was supposed to happen in the third run. It is only when we become aware of this manipulation of time that the first two runs, which seemed to us completely accidental and random, appear retrospectively to have been governed by fate. By contrast, precisely the clever manipulation of events in the third run, and the presence, however vague, of a desire to get things right this time (the desire of the characters, but also the desire of the film itself, as if it felt the pressure of the fairy-tale form, which relies precisely on repetition and final resolution of the conflict the third time around) reduces events to sheer accidents. At first, it might seem that such manipulation of time is sure to compromise the reality of what happens. Indeed, it is tempting to argue that the first two runs, precisely because they appeared fated and have tragic consequences, are more realistic than the third run, whose representation tampers with time so blatantly. However, the opposite is true: as soon as we realize that "realistic" is not necessarily the same as "real," that in fact they are opposed to each other, we understand that if fate is realistic, accidents are real, and they are real namely because they involve an active subject, who is always driven by a certain end and works against obstacles to attain that end. There is no room for subjectivity in the first and second run, because everything is destined and so is the subject: if Lola arrives at a specific point late, there is only one thing that can happen; if she is early, the same holds true. The only moment during these two runs that fate is overcome is at their respective ends, when first she and then Mani decide they do not want to die (which is what makes

possible the second and the third run). The third run, however, introduces an element of inconsistency, unpredictability, unjustifiability, contingency, i.e. it introduces Lola as a free subject: if Lola is early, events unfold as if she were late, and if she is late, everything happens as if she were early. Only the last run shows what it means to be "on time." One cannot be on time in a simulated i.e., destined/fated world: time as such does not exist in such a world. Time can be manipulated only if there is chance. Lola can arrive on time with the 10 000 marks only if it is impossible to predict whether she will be on time or not.

Given the important place of fiction or imagination in phenomenology (for example, Husserl's idea of "imaginary variation" as a method for revealing the essence of things) perhaps we could conceive the relationship between the unreal and the real according to the same model (the model provided by the analogy I drew in the beginning of this essay, an analogy between repetition or *déjà vu*, on one hand, and the two aspects of consciousness, on the other hand). This is, in fact, what Deleuze tries to do with his notion of the time-image as a manifestation of Bergsonian pure memory. The nature of time, Deleuze claims, is falsification, by which he means the rendering of beings/things/events as impersonal, infinite, or unrecognizable. The unreal, then, would be precisely the infinity of time, the infinity or indeterminability of pre-reflective consciousness. To conceive the relationship of the unreal to the real as analogous to that of the pre-reflective to the reflective would suggest that the unreal does not need to be reflected or realized (made real), whereas the real always presupposes an unreal. This, however, does not mean that the real is merely simulated: to argue that the real is produced or dissociated from the unreal does not in any way threaten the validity or truthfulness of the real (just as reflective consciousness is not less authentic, or more artificial, than pre-reflective consciousness). Perhaps the most important implication of the idea of an infinite universe and of an infinite mental life is the lack of criteria for distinguishing the real from the unreal. The concept of infinity is incommensurable with the idea of determination or delimitation, on which the real depends.

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# Are you with me?

## UNEMPLOYED NEGATIVITY IN MIKE LEIGH'S *NAKED*


by **Garry Watson**

Judging by his output so far, *Secrets and Lies* is in many ways a much more typical Mike Leigh film than *Naked*. As we can see when we note some of the things Leigh has to say about his work in the interview he granted to Graham Fuller in 1995. Thus, for example, after claiming that "what *Life is Sweet* [1990] and *High Hopes* [1988] have in common, in one way, is faith," Leigh elaborates as follows:

You can draw some parallels between Shirley and Wendy: the positive spirit in women who have faith and who have trust, and who inculcate that in other people.

In discussing *Life is Sweet*, the character that tends to be neglected the most is Natalie, the plumber. In her own quiet way, she's as much a nonconformist as Nicola. The difference





is that the nature of her nonconformity doesn't preclude getting on with living and working and in some way fulfilling herself, within limited parameters...what is important to me about her is that she is out there, rolling up her sleeves, getting on with it. (xxxi)

This gives us a fairly clear idea of what Leigh values: faith, trust, a positive spirit and "getting on with living and working." In the light of which we oughtn't to be too surprised to find that when Leigh offers to tell us what his films are actually about—"things like work, surviving, having an aged parent or whether it's a good idea to have kids" (xxi)—it is "work" that heads the list. This is more or less what one might expect of the kind of "ordinary socialist..." (xx) Leigh describes him-

self as being, of someone who claims that his films "are primarily motivated by (i) a sense of how we should behave toward each other in terms of sharing and giving" and (ii) "by a compassion for people" (xl).

It is true that in the same interview Leigh can be found expressing sympathy for "the anarchist" (xxxi) and claiming that if, on the one hand, he hasn't "made a film, including *Naked*, that doesn't include moments of warmth and compassion and sharing and giving," on the other, he also hasn't "made a film that does not include plenty of the opposite" (xxxiii). But the fact remains that this doesn't come close to preparing us for the sheer explosive force of *Naked*, all of which resides in the powerful way in which it relentlessly calls into question Leigh's own basic values.

From this point onwards I will be focussing exclusively on *Naked* but I have started off in this way because I believe that we are more likely to be able to appreciate this extraordinary film if we have *Secrets and Lies*—which also seems to me an extraordinary film and a major work of art in its own right—somewhere in mind as we reflect on it. This may be difficult to do, however, since it means keeping in mind two radically different, even opposed, perspectives. So that if, for example, *Naked* offers, through Johnny, a scathing critique of the kinds of work performed by Brian, the poster man and Louise, *Secrets and Lies*—in the midst of offering a resounding affirmation of precisely those values to which I have just referred—movingly celebrates those who roll up their sleeves and get on with whatever job they have been able to find for themselves. Nevertheless, before turning to concentrate on *Naked's* perspective, I do want to make it clear that the *other* perspective seems to me necessary also.

One further proviso. Just how powerful an achievement *Naked* actually is is only likely to become fully clear to someone who takes the opportunity provided by the published screenplay to study the dialogue with the kind of close attention it deserves. This doesn't mean that the experience of reading the screenplay can *substitute* for the experience of being exposed to the film: it obviously can't. It simply means that this film's dialogue deserves the kind of scrutiny that used to be (and sometimes still is) given to literary texts, to a play by Shakespeare or Beckett, for example—the main difference being that in this case *constant* reference to the experience of seeing the film is absolutely *essential*, whereas in the case of any theatrical piece, reference to any particular performance of it is optional. In short, it means that *Naked's* dialogue is, by any standards, exceptionally rich. As can be seen, for example, in the following excerpt:

JOHNNY: So ... I dunno ... Would you describe yourself as a ... happy little person?

SOPHIE: Yeah ... I'm the life and soul.

JOHNNY: Have you ever thought, right ... I mean, you don't know, but you might already 'ave had the happiest



moment in your whole fuckin' life, and all you've got to look forward to is sickness and purgatory?

SOPHIE: Oh, shit! Well ... I just live from day to day, meself.  
(*She takes back the joint.*)

JOHNNY: I tend to skip a day now and again—you know what I mean? I used to be a werewolf, but I'm all right NOW!!

SOPHIE: Oh, fuckin' 'ell!! I bet they're 'appy, eh? All they gotta do is sit round, howlin' at the moon.

JOHNNY: It's better than standin' on the cheesy fuckin' thing. Know what I mean? I mean, tossin' all these satellites and shuttles out into the cosmos—what do they think they're gonna find up there that they can't find down 'ere? They think if they piss high enough, they're gonna come across the monkey with the beard and the crap ideas, and it's like, "Oh, there you are, Captain! I mean ... are you busy, because I've got a few fundamental questions for you!" Are you with me?

(*Naked*, ellipses in screenplay 9)

The topic being discussed in it is happiness and, if Johnny opens it on an unpromising note of slight condescension, Sophie immediately disarms him ("I'm the life and soul"). She then neatly deflects his mock-gloomy, follow-up, suggestion that perhaps she has already experienced the happiest moment of her life, by claiming that she "just live[s] from day to day," and this generates one of the happiest *exchanges*—of spontaneous wit and collaborative invention—in the film. The questions "[Y]ou know what I mean?" and "Are you with me?" recur throughout *Naked*, and the exhilaratingly rapid and delightful associations we witness Johnny and Sophie both making here are made possible by the fact that Sophie *does* know what he means, that she demonstrably *is* with him.

But we must now back up and recall how the film begins. The first thing we see is Johnny, the central protagonist, having sex with a woman, standing up against a wall in a dark back alley, in Manchester. The sex seems consensual at first but then the woman protests and shouts out—Johnny is hurting her, in the words of the screenplay (which are always italicized) he is "*pushing her head back, his hand under her chin* (*Naked* 5). The next thing we see is that Johnny is running off as she is promising to tell her Bernard about him ("You're fuckin' dead!!" [5]). We then see Johnny run into his house and almost immediately run out again with a canvas shoulder-bag. As he runs through the streets, he notices a car with its boot open and its ignition keys in the boot-lock. So he takes it, drives away and before long we see him on a motor-way, where he spends most of the night driving.

In the Fuller interview Leigh claims that "*Naked* begins by showing Johnny in the most negative light possible, so that you then have to make a journey from there and confront yourself with the fact that you may actually find him charismatic, as well as loathing him" (xxxii). This isn't strictly speaking accurate. There are moments later on when Johnny appears in a more negative light than he does in the opening. To say this is not to deny, however, that the opening is disturbing, which it certainly is. Mainly because of two things: (i) the fact that what Johnny does to the woman in the street is

not entirely clear—all that is clear is that it obviously causes her pain; (ii) the way in which we get caught up in Johnny's haste—first, as we see through the lens of a hand-held camera rushing along beside him and then, as we find ourselves trapped in the position of back-seat passengers in the stolen car—all to the accompaniment of a suspense-engendering musical score. We are plunged, in other words, right into a tension-building situation, as we find ourselves having to accompany—and therefore virtually having also to identify with—a man whom we have just seen hurting a woman, a man who has more or less deliberately got himself into trouble, and who seems to be heading for more trouble.

Arriving in London the next morning, Johnny dumps the stolen car and walks to the address of his ex-girlfriend Louise, who is house-sharing with Sandra and Sophie. When Johnny turns up no-one is in: Louise is away at work, Sandra is on holiday in Zimbabwe, and Sophie is out somewhere. Sophie gets back first, discovers Johnny—whom she has never met before—sitting on the doorstep, and invites him in for a cup of tea. Louise doesn't return from work until the evening, which means that Johnny and Sophie spend the day together—spend it, it would seem (from the little we glimpse), joking and flirting and smoking a joint or two. They can do this because—unlike Louise, who has (in Johnny's mocking words) got herself "a posh job in the big 'shitty'"—they are both "on the fuckin' dole" (14). Having invaded her space and then spent the day flirting with one of her house-mates, Johnny doesn't even try to appear glad to see Louise when she turns up: instead, he is openly rude and sarcastic to her.

So what are we to make of—how are we to understand—Johnny's behaviour? We are obviously not going to get very far with the film until we arrive at a satisfactory answer to this question. It isn't an easy question to answer and it is surely impossible to answer it on first viewing, if only because Johnny is constantly surprising us. But I do have some suggestions.

Critics have already noted in Leigh's film echoes of Renoir's *Boudu Sauvé des Eaux* but, while I agree that there are indeed resemblances, my first suggestion is that it is more important to see *Naked* as belonging to the more literary genre of the Saturnalian dialogue. More specifically, I think it should be seen as extending what Michael André Bernstein has identified as a "negative and bitter strand at the core of the Saturnalia itself" (Bernstein 17). Though he traces this strand back as far as such classical satires as Horace's *Seventh* and the works of Rabelais, Bernstein is particularly interested in the emergence of "the Abject Hero" whom he considers "essentially modern," making "his first full appearance in [Diderot's] *Le Neveu de Rameau*" (18). Bernstein explains that "the Abject Hero seeks to exploit ... a double authority deriving from a double ancestry. The first is the freedom of the King's fool ... The second role model is the archetypal 'wild man from the desert' whose imprecations and prophecies proved true when all the philosophies professed by the officially sanctioned sages were revealed as hollow." The Abject Hero developed, in other words, out of the "licensed clown" and "the holy fool of religious parables" (30). I'm suggesting, then, that Johnny should be seen as the latest in an impressive line of Abject Heroes and



that *Naked* reinvigorates a tradition that Bernstein himself thinks has grown hopelessly corrupt and that I admit is in some ways problematical. Not least, for example, in its recurrent misogyny. (I'm thinking of Wayne Booth's reassessment of Rabelais's Saturnalia in the light of the feminist challenge, especially his comments on the episode featuring "the trick Panurge plays upon the Lady of Paris," his sprinkling "her gown with the ground-up pieces of the genitals of a bitch in heat" [Booth 400]. But consider too the Underground Man's cruel and humiliating treatment of Liza, the young prostitute, in Dostoevsky's novella. I comment on the treatment of misogyny in *Naked* below, but see also in this connection Carol Watt's defence of the film.)

My second suggestion concerns something Johnny says to Sandra about Sophie near the end of the film:

She's got this kind of, er, irritatin' proclivity for negation—I suppose she thinks it's progressive or somethin'.  
(*Naked* 94)

I think that we will be better able to understand Johnny's behaviour—and therefore to grasp what *Naked* has to offer us—once we recognize that, much more even than Sophie, Johnny himself has a marked "proclivity for negation." And, however unlikely it may at first appear, I suggest that this proclivity of his can usefully be seen in the light of some of the things the French writer Georges Bataille had to say in a letter he wrote in 1937 to Alexander Kojève.

Kojève is now best known for having introduced Bataille's generation of French intellectuals to the philosophy of Hegel and to the (counter intuitive) Hegelian argument according to which history has come to an end. I'm *not* suggesting that either Leigh or Thewlis had any of these figures in mind. It has to be admitted, furthermore, that *Johnny's* references to the end—"The end of the world in nigh, Bri. The game is up!" (*Naked* 45)—are not to the end of history (in the Kojève-Hegelian sense of this phrase) but to the end of the world, and they are allusions to the Biblical notion of Apocalypse. But, in any case, all I'm claiming is that Johnny's behaviour begins to make much more sense when seen in the context of the terms Bataille provides in the following excerpt from his letter to Kojève:

I admit—as a likely assumption—that as of now, history's finished (except for the wrap-up) ... The experiences I've lived through and been so concerned about have led me to think there is nothing more for me "to do" ...

If action ("doing") is (as Hegel says) negativity, then there is still the problem of knowing whether the negativity of someone who "doesn't have anything more to do" disappears or remains in a state of "unemployed negativity." As for me, I can only decide in one way, since I am exactly this "unemployed negativity" (I couldn't define myself with more clarity). ("Letter" 123)

Having, in other words, been persuaded by the argument that History has come to an end, Bataille has come to the conclu-

sion that there is no longer anything worthwhile for him "to do," which presumably means that he thinks none of the available forms of work are worth doing. It is easy to see why some might find this highly offensive, the kind of reflection that could only come from someone who is at least relatively privileged and well-off. Try reading it out to those who are desperately looking for a job—to the young heroine of the Dardenne brothers's *Rosetta* (1999) for example. But, on the other hand, if we allow no-one to raise the kind of questions Bataille is raising here, then we effectively tighten the hold that the system we are all caught up in has over us. And it seems to me that what Leigh has done in *Naked*—having in his earlier film *Meantime* (1983) sensitively explored the demoralizing effects of unemployment—is create in Johnny, who is of course something of an autodidact, a character who can raise these questions in such a way as to force us to consider them.

Seen in this perspective, then, what the film's opening scenes show is Johnny moving from one state (of employed negativity) to another (that of unemployed negativity). If *employed* negativity is the kind that finds expression in action or doing (like labour or work-in-general, for example, or, in Johnny's case, theft—at the end of the film as well as at the beginning), the *unemployed* negativity is the kind whose mail outlet—at least, where Johnny and Bataille are concerned—is language. And whether or not he would share Bataille's preference for the former (if it were available)—Bataille explaining that, in *his* case, his own negativity "gave up being employed only when it couldn't any longer *be* employed: it's the negativity of a man who has nothing more to do, not of a man who prefers speaking" ("Letter," my italics; 124)—Johnny also seems to be convinced that it is *not* available; that, like Bataille's, his negativity can no longer be employed either, even if he wanted to be. Like it or not, it would seem that speech is all that is left.

At the outset, Johnny is, as we've just seen, literally unemployed (on the dole). But what is more important is that he seems to share Bataille's feeling that there is nothing more for him "to do" either—in the sense, that is to say, of meaningful and productive work, a job worth doing, let's say, and not merely as a way of earning one's living. Except, in Johnny's case, for one thing, which is the main thing we see him doing throughout the film: attempting to engage others in dialogue and then challenging them—most of them, at any rate—to provide justifications for what *they* have decided "to do," which is to say, for the ways in which they spend their time.

If the reference to a "proclivity for negation" provides us with one hint as to how we might most profitably understand *Naked*, the film offers us other useful suggestions of particularly rewarding ways in too: for example, Brian the night watchman's parting words to Johnny—"Don't ... waste ... your life" (ellipses in screenplay; 57)—and Johnny's ironical but also affectionate description of the homeless Scotsman, Archie—"He's a wonderful exponent of the Socratic debate" (32). From one commonsensical—basically utilitarian—point of view, Johnny is, of course, precisely, wasting his life. But from another point of view, which we are invited to share while watching *Naked* (and drop or suspend while watching *Secrets and Lies*), he



is not wasting his life at all, but rather spending his time in the most profitable way possible. He is trying to draw people into a kind (often, admittedly, an initially-difficult-to-recognize kind) of "Socratic debate" that is clearly designed to get them to question their basic assumptions—with a view to possibly transforming their lives. Like Diderot's Rameau, in other words, Johnny appropriates "the Socratic role of the 'quirky gadfly', needling a pompous or rigid opponent" (Bernstein 67). Though he certainly doesn't say so explicitly, what Johnny is effectively urging his interlocutors to do (at least those of them who seem capable of hearing what he has to say) is to start attending to what is most important in life, in other words, to start taking care of themselves. And this, incidentally, is precisely what Socrates was after, a point made especially clearly in Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Hadot being the contemporary philosopher who was the big influence on Michel Foucault's later thinking on the care of the self. To put it simply, from this point of view, philosophy is a form of therapy for the soul. Hence, the (no doubt unintended) appropriateness of the fact that the first poster the poster-sticking man puts up is for "THERAPY?"

I disagree, therefore, with the view that "Johnny doesn't use his intellect to engage with other people; [that] he uses it as a buffer to his own near-psychotic condition and as a weapon of subordination, just as Hamlet uses his own wit as a stalking horse under whose cover he shoots at others (that's everyone) less witty than himself" (Coveney 28). If, when he and Louise meet up again, at the beginning of the film, Johnny is very rude to her, it is because she is refusing, at this point, to engage with *him*—at least on the unconventional terms he proposes. As we can see, for example, in the following:

JOHNNY: So how's, um ... work?

LOUISE: It's all right.

JOHNNY: It's all right.

LOUISE: Yeah.

JOHNNY: What did you hope it would be?

(Pause. LOUISE exhales some cigarette smoke.)

I'm sorry—did you [he's now addressing Sophie] get that? It's everything she hoped it would be, but she doesn't fuckin' know what she hoped it would be! (12)

And it seems to me that, on this occasion, at least, his rudeness is intended not to keep her at a distance but to provoke her into a reaction that is more than merely rote and non-committal.

If so, it obviously fails. Johnny had more luck in the exchange (on happiness) we looked at earlier, the exchange with Sophie, in which we see him doing what he loves to do best—putting things into question—and Sophie entering right into the good-natured spirit of it. Not, as we have already seen, that Johnny is always good-natured. Far from it. But it may be that he is *more* good-natured than would seem—in view of his undeniably nasty outbursts elsewhere—to be possible. Consider, for example, the late exchange with Sandra that follows Johnny's asking her—while she is reversing a decorative fire-screen, which has been facing the wall—what would happen if, at birth, the umbilical cord was never cut:

SANDRA: Why do you feel the need ... to take the piss?

JOHNNY: I'm not takin' the piss. It's nice that (*the firescreen*)—where's it from?

SANDRA: I don't know, it's something my dad ...

(*They look at it.*)

JOHNNY: Now you see, Sophie just turned that to the wall.

She's got this kind of, er, irritatin' proclivity for negation—I suppose she thinks it's progressive or somethin'.

SANDRA: What is your problem?







JOHNNY: Nothing. What's your problem?

SANDRA: All these silly questions and ...

JOHNNY: Well, look, I've never met a nurse before, and I'm just interested in, er ... well, in life. I mean, d'you think it's worth savin'? (93-4)

In addition to his good-humour, I think this reveals two other things: (i) the extent to which Johnny is naturally curious about the life around him; and (ii) the fact that, though they are often couched in humour, the questions he poses are

invariably (to use his own word) "fundamental" (9) ones, and not at all "silly." I'm thinking here not just of the last question (as to whether or not life may be "worth savin'") but of the earlier one concerning the umbilical cord too—in view of the references Johnny elsewhere makes to his mother, this question also seems to me to be seriously intended.

It seems possible, incidentally, that if Johnny is a bit gentler in his dealings with Sandra than with almost anyone else he meets, this might be because her job is one he actually has some respect for. We can perhaps detect a note of slight regret



when, as he is looking through a large anatomy volume much earlier in Sandra's bedroom, he tells Sophie that he "could've been a doctor" (22). And, the subsequent exchange can be seen to constitute a significant turning point, at least for Sophie:

SOPHIE: D'you wanna examine me?

JOHNNY: You don't believe me, do you?

SOPHIE: I believe everything you say.

JOHNNY: I've got A-level Psychology.

SOPHIE: You 'aven't!

JOHNNY: "Resolve is never stronger than in the morning after the night it was never weaker." What d'you think of that?

SOPHIE: It's a load of bollocks. (*She giggles.*)

JOHNNY: I thought of that. D'you not agree with it?

SOPHIE: Dunno ...

JOHNNY: Yeah, well, that's 'cos you weren't fuckin' listening, were you?

(*SOPHIE sits up.*)

SOPHIE: What's this? A test or somethin'?

(*She fondles Johnny's hair. They kiss, gently.*) (22-23)

In retrospect, we can see that this was indeed a kind of test—

not the kind you consciously set for someone, but the kind we sometimes find ourselves taking anyway—and that Sophie failed it. Johnny was not asking her—nor does he ask anyone else—to believe everything he says. What he wants from others is something he is prepared to give in return: the willingness to listen, to think for themselves, and to argue back. As opposed, for example, to either the total compliance that Sophie quickly proceeds to offer him or the attitude he complains of in his later encounter with the poster-man—a determination to "[b]lank it all out" (74)—and that Louise seems to be exhibiting on the second evening when she insists on watching the TV and refuses (for perfectly understandable reasons) to pay any attention to him.

Not surprisingly, however, it is precisely here that Johnny decides to leave the house, and, when he returns, he only does so—two nights later—out of necessity, after he has been badly beaten up and is in serious need of help.

### Onto the Streets

He [Socrates] was a street person.

—Hadot ("The Figure" 152)

*Naked:* Sophie (Katrin Cartlidge) and Louise (Lesley Sharp)





During this vitally important sequence we see Johnny on and off—and largely at the mercy of—the streets, which function, I would argue, in this film as an urban equivalent of the heath in *King Lear*. He spends the first night out with a young Scots couple, Archie and Maggie—two of the wretches to whom, in effect, he voluntarily does what Lear (in the great “Poor naked wretches” speech) says “pomp” should do, exposing himself “to feel what wretches feel” [111,iv,34]). Or, rather, to be more exact, he first notices Archie, who has lost Maggie and is calling out her name. Ironically, Johnny asks Archie if he is “lookin’ for somebody?” to which Archie’s response is first the exclamation “Fuck off, cunt!” and then, moments later, a request for a cigarette (27). Clearly more amused and intrigued by Archie’s roughness than bothered by it, Johnny engages the young man in conversation and soon learns that he has cracked his father “on the nut wi’ a poker” and is therefore “on the run”—an admission that prompts Johnny to confess he is on the run too (29).

Gradually we realize that Johnny has befriended Archie, whom he eventually persuades to “ave a little wander round and go look for the wee lassie” (30) while he, Johnny, waits where he is—“[a]nd if she turns up, I’ll keep ‘er ‘ere till you get back” (31). When she does turn up, Johnny has difficulty getting her to understand that he has been in touch with Archie and again, he is as undaunted—indeed, as amused—by her response to his invitation to her to come and sit with him, as he was earlier by Archie’s:

MAGGIE: Fuck off, you dirty cunt!

(*She walks away.*)

JOHNNY: (*Laughing*) Yeah, well, I know I’ve not ‘ad a bath for a good few seasons, but there’s no need to ‘urt my feelin’s. ‘E’ll be back in a minute!

(*MAGGIE turns around.*) (32)

In this way, Johnny starts to befriend her too, learns that she spent the previous night sleeping in the park, is clearly concerned that that must have been cold, and admits that on this particular night he too plans to sleep “[w]herever I drop” (34). A bit later Archie appears and we understand that—without his taking any credit for it—Johnny has helped make it possible for them to find one another again. And though the language they use with one another—“ARCHIE: Where the fuck ‘a you been?/ MAGGIE: Where the fuck ‘a you been?”—is just as violent and obscene as the language they use with others, it seems obvious that, in their own determinedly unsentimental way (“MAGGIE [to Archie]: Fuck off! Fuckin’ leave us alone!/ ARCHIE [to Maggie]: Kick your fuckin’ cunt ... [*They disappear into the darkness*]” [35]), they are lovers. A bit like Punch and Judy, or—to mention two comedians Johnny later confesses to liking (“although apparently,” he tells the poster-man, “they didn’t get on in real life, you know—another illusion shattered” [73])—Laurel and Hardy. Or again, like two characters out of Samuel Beckett (“Nothing to be done” being the relevant-seeming opening line of *Waiting for Godot*).

In any case, like Johnny himself, these two tramp-like figures are unemployed, homeless and on the run. But whereas

he is exceptionally quick-witted, they appear to be mentally impaired and are barely articulate. When Johnny meets up with them, one after the other, there is only one thing they are interested in “doing”: finding one another. Except, of course, that, strictly speaking, from an Hegelian point of view, their desperate attempt to find one another doesn’t really involve any “doing” (in the sense of negating) at all. Nor—or so Johnny seems to feel—does it require any justification. Hence, perhaps, his willingness to go out of his way to help them.

We jump next to the following night when we see Johnny “huddled in the doorway of a modern office block” and “reading his pocket Bible” (37). A security guard comes out to investigate—or, perhaps, out of simple curiosity, just to look Johnny over. At any rate, instead of doing what Johnny half-expects him to do—either asking him to move on or “stick[ing] the boot in”—Brian, the guard, surprises Johnny by asking if he doesn’t have anywhere to go. Johnny replies that he has “an infinite number of fuckin’ places to go. The problem is, where you stay. Are you,” he then wants to know, “with me?” And, again to his surprise, Brian is with him: “Indeed, yes” (38). So that, moments later, after he has returned inside to get on with his work, he is out again, this time, Johnny is sure, to get him to leave (“Yeah, all right, pal. I appreciate you’ve got a job to do, an’ it’s MOVE ON! MOVE ON! MOVE ON! But it’s fuckin’ freezin’ out there, an’ I was a Caesarian” [39]). Instead of which Brian invites him in out of the cold.

In Brian, Johnny has finally met someone who, if not exactly his match, at least shares his interest in reflecting on, and arguing about, “fundamental questions.” And since for Johnny, as we’ve already seen, the *most* fundamental is the question as to what, if anything, at the end of time, is still worth “doing,” it doesn’t take long for him to announce that Brian has “succeeded in convincin’ [him] that [he] do[es] ‘ave the most tedious fuckin’ job in England” (42). At first, Brian agrees (“Yes! It is a boring job! Bloody boring, actually” [42]) but he then has second thoughts and starts to mount a defence. He claims that Johnny can only see the “present,” the “tedious here and now.” What Johnny doesn’t realize is that the job secures Brian’s future, which means that “it’s not a boring job” after all.

Poor Brian, he has just given Johnny exactly the sort of opportunity he loves: first to point out that “there’s nothing wrong with the present”—except for the fact that “the bastard doesn’t exist” (43); and secondly to argue, with reference to the future, that Brian doesn’t “even ‘ave a fuckin’ future. I don’t ‘ave a future. Nobody ‘as a future. The party’s over” (44). But, however much he likes an intellectual contest (and also, it has to be admitted, however much he likes—in unsocratic fashion—to show his intellect off), Johnny never loses sight of the fact that his self-imposed task is not simply to win arguments: it is to strip his interlocutors of their illusions and false hopes, thereby helping them to confront—by making it more difficult for them to avoid—reality. Thus, after arguing that it’s a mistake to place any hope in God—“that God is a hateful God” so “there’s no hope [to be found there]” (48)—Johnny notices that Brian has got into the habit of watching a woman who dances alone every night in a lighted apartment across the



street. In response to Johnny's questioning, Brian admits that he has once seen her naked and he wonders aloud "what's her game, taunting people in the middle of the night, eh?" When Johnny suggests that "[s]he probably gets a kick out of it. Like you get a kick out o' watchin' 'er," Brian denies doing any "such thing" (50). The clear implication is that Brian is deluding himself about this and so—no matter how harmless such a delusion might seem to be—Johnny's next step is to take it upon himself to expose it.

He crosses the street, knocks on the woman's door and manages to charm his way inside and up to her room. From Brian's vantage-point across the street, she had seemed (in Johnny's words) a "[g]lood-lookin' young girl" (49) and the following morning, when Johnny and Brian discuss what happened (or didn't happen) over breakfast in the nearby Jubilee Cafe, Brian can't believe what Johnny has to report, which is that she's actually older than he is (56). Then, as if to demonstrate that he still has one resource or dream left intact, Brian shows Johnny a photograph of a cottage in Ireland by the sea where he's "gonna live" (57). And it is immediately after Johnny has pronounced his uncompromising and cruel verdict—"Fuckin' shit-hole, innit?"—that Brian utters his last words to him, urging or warning him not to waste his life.

But by then Johnny has already become interested in someone else, the waitress who has served Brian breakfast. And later that day, he charms his way into *her* place. Unfortunately for him, however, just when he seems assured of a room for the night, she throws him out—even though (in his own words) "it's like a fuckin' Eskimo's grave out there" (70). And so later that night, we once again find him "*sitting, huddled in a doorway*" (71).

But he is not alone for long: a young man turns up and starts to put up a large poster. As we might expect by now, Johnny's interest is instantly aroused. He first tries a joke ("Is this a stick-up?" [71]) and then asks if this is the man's "job, or a nice little hobby [he's] got for [him]self?" The next thing we know Johnny is enjoying a lift in the man's van and is asking the driver how much he earns "for doin' this"—"I mean, is the pay as substantial as say, er, the wages of sin? You know what I mean? Are you with me?". Though the poster-man says, on the one hand, that what he earns is "none of [Johnny's] fuckin' business," on the other, he does give Johnny a lift and, when they arrive at the next "*illicit billboard site*," he also allows him to "ave a go" at putting up a poster himself. So, on one level, at least, he might be said to be "with" Johnny. But we have seen that Johnny doesn't usually make it easy for his interlocutors and he soon manages, not only to make a mess of the poster he has asked to put up, but also to get heavily sarcastic ("does it take like thousands of years of like state-subsidized government training to do this clobber, yeah? ... It's a wonderful career opportunity for me"). Talk about biting the hand that feeds you, or trying someone's patience! Yet the poster-man ignores the sarcasm, tells Johnny to get out of the way and continues his work. This leaves both of them facing the wall but Johnny with nothing to do and so, in effect, he does what Bataille says the man of unemployed negativity does and "confronts his own negativity as if it's a wall" ("Letter" 125).

He does this by improvising a brilliant free-associational monologue on walls ("the Great Wall of China, and, and, the Wall of Jericho, and the Berlin Wall, and the Wailin' Wall"), in the midst of which he vigorously head-butts the wall in front of him. At which point, noticing that the poster-man has been hanging up a number of "Cancelled" signs, Johnny turns to a more direct form of attack:

JOHNNY: What are you doin'? Cancel everything. In the beginnin' was the Word, and the word was "CANCELLED." D'you get like satisfaction out of this? D'you think you're makin' a contribution? You're like sort of publicly promulgatin' vacuities? Are you with me?

(*The MAN walks off briskly.*) (73)

Faced with the inescapable fact that the poster-man is now definitely *not* "with" him, Johnny, still refusing to give up, follows him to his van and practically invites the beating up he finally receives:

JOHNNY: Oh, that's it! Blank it all out! Blank it all out till you just atrophy and die of fuckin' indifference!

(*The man is closing his back doors.*)

Can I show you somethin', pal? You see that at the top of your legs? That's your arse and that's your fuckin' elbow! D'you wanna write it down, or s-

(*The MAN assaults JOHNNY. He knees him in the crotch and knocks him down. Then he kicks his arse very hard.*) (74)

If ever anyone asked for it ...

Yet what perseverance! And what can such perseverance possibly mean if not that, in his own way, Johnny *cares*, cares deeply about the people he comes into contact with, and is doing his best to wake them up, to prevent them from "just atrophy[ing] and [dying] of fuckin' indifference"?

### Johnny and the women

But does this apply to the women Johnny meets as much as it does to the men? Or does he maintain a double standard? One thing is clear: Johnny's treatment of women deserves to be examined separately. Let's take his relationship with Sophie first. As we have already seen, it starts off promisingly and continues that way through their first bout of vigorous love-making. The description of the action that Leigh is careful to provide in the screenplay seems to me accurate and reliable. The love-making begins on the sofa ("*They kiss passionately, with a hint of sexual aggression, which is mutual, though initiated by Johnny.*"), moves to the stairs ("*No sexual aggression from Johnny.*") and ends up on the floor in Sophie's room ("*SOPHIE is on top. It is passionate and loving. No aggression from Johnny. Ecstatic moans from SOPHIE.*") (17).

This is followed, however, by the sequence in which Sophie appears more intent on flattering Johnny ("I believe everything you say") than in engaging with him. After which their sex-play no longer seems so playful, and is not at all loving. Thus, after she tells Johnny that she likes him and he maintains that she doesn't know him, we get the following:



SOPHIE: I think I do.  
 JOHNNY: You don't fuckin'—(He pulls her abruptly down to him by the hair.)  
 SOPHIE: Oh, shit!  
 JOHNNY: —know me!  
 SOPHIE: Fuckin' hell!  
 (He pins her arm behind her back.)  
 JOHNNY: D'you still like me?  
 SOPHIE: I love you.  
 JOHNNY: What?  
 SOPHIE: I'm in love with you, Johnny.  
 (He laughs.)  
 Don't laugh—I'm serious, uh!  
 (Grasping her hair very tightly, he forces her head upwards, then down into his chest. She gasps for breath.)  
 I understand you, Johnny ... I do.  
 Minutes later, still fully clothed, they are having a fuck at the other end of the sofa. JOHNNY is on top. He is holding Sophie's face roughly. She gasps and whimpers and struggles. He starts to bang her head against the arm of the sofa. (23-4)

This is reminiscent of some of the scenes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—of such moments as the one in which Helena tells Demetrius that the more he beats her, the more she “will fawn on [him]” (“Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me, / Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave, / Unworthy as I am, to follow you” [2.1,204-7]). But if this is painful enough in Shakespeare, at least Demetrius doesn't actually strike Helena. No wonder then—since Johnny is not just verbally but *physically* cruel to Sophie, and when she is most vulnerable, in the sexual act—if it is so much *more* painful to watch the scene in *Naked*.

What are we to make of this? We can start by noting that it fits into something of a pattern. Thus, for example, in the course of the “rough fuck” Johnny is having at the beginning of the film, the woman he is having it with first “seems enthusiastic” but then begins to protest (“You're hurting me-!”) when he starts to push “her head back, his hand under her chin”—while “[h]is other hand pins down her wrist” (5). And there is a similar moment in his encounter with the older woman who dances alone in her room late at night, at least partly for the benefit of Brian's voyeuristic gaze across the street:

JOHNNY: 'Ow old are you, love? It's funny, 'cos from over there you look a lot younger. I think me big brother's quite taken with you.  
 (She takes a sip of vodka.)  
 'E's up there every night, 'avin' a bit of a wank about yer. Are you with me?  
 (... He kisses her on the mouth, gently at first, but his grip on her hair becomes gradually tighter. He starts to jolt her head a little. He is hurting her. She grabs his wrists to try to pull his hands off. She gasps with pain. Suddenly, he stops the kiss, but he keeps hold of her hair.)  
 What's the matter?  
 WOMAN: Don't do that.  
 JOHNNY: What, that? (He jolts her head.) Or that? (He jolts it

again.) Don't you like that? (He jolts it back.)  
 WOMAN: You don't 'ave to 'urt me.  
 (He brings his face close to hers.)  
 JOHNNY: I'm sorry.  
 (He jolts her head, then lets go of her hair ...) (53-4)

These two scenes are also difficult and painful to watch. But *why* does Johnny behave in this way? Why is he so vicious, so mean, so cruel? And what—apart from calling it by its proper name: sadism—are we to make of this appalling behaviour?

One possibility is that Johnny can only perform sexually if his partner allows him to hurt her. So that a bit later, when the dancing woman “adopts a ‘sexy’ pose,” Johnny is obliged to tell her “I can't, love. You look like me mother” (55). And if we reflect on the sequence that ends up with Jeremy raping Sophie—her “whipping him strenuously with her long hair” and his first instructing her not to “give up” and then forcing her to wear Sandra's nursing uniform (60, 61)—then it would seem that this is a problem (of arousal) that Johnny has in common with Jeremy. Though it's also worth noting that when Sophie asks Louise if Johnny ever hurt *her* (“when you were fuckin'”), Louise doesn't seem to know what Sophie is talking about (36).

Could it also be that this is one of Johnny's ways (undeniably least attractive ways, to put it mildly) of teaching a lesson? There is probably an element of this, at least in the cases of both Sophie and the drunken dancer, both of whom appear to be either indifferent to, or trying to blank out, uncomfortable truths. But if so, the idea that Johnny should have taken it upon himself to bring these truths home, as it were, is surely outrageous. What arrogance!

### Jeremy and the question of misogyny

There can be no doubt but that these are the scenes in which we see Johnny in the most negative light. But is his use of physical abuse evidence of misogyny? Of course, *one* of the characters in this film, Jeremy, is unmistakably a misogynist. But it doesn't therefore automatically follow that Johnny can't be one too. No, Johnny *could* be one, but I don't think he is—not consistently, at any rate, even if he does sometimes express misogynistic attitudes and does sometimes treat women badly. After all, he also occasionally sounds misanthropic and his treatment of Brian and the poster man is not exactly delicate either. In addition to which, it could be argued that the person he is hardest on is himself.

I think that Jeremy's case can help us to make some of the difficult but necessary distinctions.

If *Naked* generates a considerable degree of suspense, if it is often frightening, this is mainly due to Jeremy's obnoxious presence. And it isn't just that we are frightened by the thought of what he might do next, it is also that our growing awareness of the sickness of which *he* is capable in his treatment of women deepens the sense of apprehension we feel whenever Johnny is alone with a woman. This effect is largely achieved by the way Leigh cuts back and forth. Here, to begin with, for example, is how the happy exchange between Johnny and Sophie that we looked at earlier continues:



SOPHIE: Yeah ... 'cos let's face it, right, what are rockets? I mean, they're just ... big metal pricks! You know, I mean, the bastards aren't satisfied with fuckin' the earth up—they've gotta fuck space an' all.  
(Johnny takes back the joint.)

JOHNNY: Will you tell me something, love? Are you aware of the effect you have on the average mammalian, Mancunian, x-y-ly-chromosome, slaving, lusty male member of the species?

SOPHIE: Er ... yeah.

JOHNNY: I thought so. (9-10)

But this good feeling quickly evaporates as Leigh immediately cuts from it to a brief scene in a gym, in which we see Jeremy—who has a sneer on his face that we later realize is part of his permanent expression—exercising his arm muscles and then being massaged, in the course of which he asks his masseuse first if she would like to have dinner with him and then if she thinks “women like being raped?” (10)

Johnny and Sophie's bout of happy love-making occurs not long after this. It is preceded by our getting a glimpse of Jeremy and the masseuse having dinner in a restaurant; intercut with a brief scene that shows him being dumped by the masseuse and switching his attention to the waitress who has been serving them; and immediately followed by a scene in Jeremy's “cold, trendy bachelor flat,” to which he has now returned with Giselle, the waitress. Soon he is telling her to kiss him and, as the screenplay puts it, “[s]he does so, with great feeling.” But then something happens that we don't see, we only see the effect it produces. Presumably he has bitten her because, “[a]fter a few moments, she screams with pain and sits back. JEREMY sniggers. She manages to smile bravely and nurses her lip.” Moments later Jeremy is using a stuffed lizard to increase Giselle's discomfort, first rubbing it on her bare arm, then making it “bite her left breast”, and finally making it “go for her neck.” And the sequence comes to an end in his bedroom where we see him throwing Giselle “roughly on to the bed” and then “grasping her wrists and pinning them down”. Ignoring her protest (“You're hurting me!”), he asks her if she has “ever thought of committing suicide,” explains that he intends to do so himself on his fortieth birthday, and then proceeds—in vampire-like fashion—to fall “violently on her neck. She screams out loud in pain and fear” (20).

This is creepy, and becoming increasingly sinister. It is made clear, furthermore, when—in two of the scenes I've already discussed—we next see Johnny roughing up first Sophie and then the drunken solo-dancer, that the level of sexual violence is escalating. And it reaches its high point when—just after Johnny has persuaded the waitress from the Jubilee Cafe to take him home with her—we see Jeremy ruthlessly raping Sophie. She clearly states her desire to stop (“I just don't think I can go through with this”) and the screenplay graphically describes what happens:

(She attempts to go. JEREMY grabs hold of her. He throws her back on to the bed and jumps on top of her. He goes for her neck. She screams.)

Oh ... no! No!

(Shortly after this, JEREMY has SOPHIE forced into a kneeling position on the bed. He is gripping her hair. She is wearing the uniform. He is naked. He is taking her from behind, aggressively, violently, horribly. He is grunting. SOPHIE is screaming desperately.) (61)

This gets it exactly right: it is indeed horrible, grotesquely so, and would be even if we didn't know the character involved. But it is made even more unbearable by the fact that we have come by this point to care quite a bit for Sophie. The awful spectacle of her humiliation and pain is not easy to continue watching.

There is no ambiguity about this scene and it leaves us with an extremely uneasy feeling that something even worse might be about to happen as Leigh cuts to the interior of the house to which Johnny has been brought by the waitress. But in fact, up until the moment when she rather abruptly orders him to leave and he curses her, he behaves quite gently, even tenderly, towards this young woman. This may be partly because, leaving aside a certain vagueness in her manner and judging by her “very sad face,” which Johnny confesses to finding “attractive” (68), she, at least, unlike most of the other people he has been encountering, does not seem engaged in “[b]lank[ing] it all out.” It's true that after she has ordered him to leave he does curse her—in what I think Coveney is right to call “a grim echo of the womb-curse in *King Lear*” (Coveney 28)—and he does so violently. But there is no hint of any physical violence—and he does leave.

### Aggression: in theory and practice

So what am I saying? First, that the juxtaposition of Jeremy's behaviour with Johnny's forces us to admit that there are of course degrees of viciousness. And that, in itself, may not be difficult to do, may be relatively uncontroversial. After all, even when he is being physically most abusive, Johnny does, at a certain point, pull back—at least in his dealings with Sophie and the dancer (and it's really not clear how far he has gone with the woman in the opening scene). But while it's relatively easy to agree that this should surely affect the way we think about his behaviour, it's not so easy to decide by how much, or in what way. In any case, the same juxtaposition raises questions concerning aggression that are genuinely disturbing.

It's interesting to note, therefore, what Leigh himself had to say on the subject, while responding to the criticism that the film is misogynistic. While admitting, in the interview he gave to Fuller, that “the film definitely and unashamedly deals with some unacceptable aspects of male heterosexual behaviour by showing two guys who manifest these traits in different ways,” Leigh then proceeds to differentiate between Johnny and Jeremy by claiming that the latter is “so eaten up with selfishness and ambition that he presents this unacceptable face of male behaviour in a way that becomes absolute. I think,” he then adds, “that's important, because [it means that?] you could start to let Johnny off the hook; he's a truly frustrated guy, but I don't think he's a misogynist as such” (xxxvi).





*Naked: Sophie and Louise with the sadistic Jeremy, who won't go away (Greg Cruttwell).*

Whether we agree or not, this at least is clear. But what are we to make of the exchange that follows it a moment or two later?

FULLER: *The tone, though, is set at the beginning when you see him raping the woman in the alleyway in Manchester.*

LEIGH: There's no question he has that violence within him. I'm merely saying that it's more complex than that. Frankly, I think it's very common male behaviour, and the way that a number of the women respond to it in the film is not uncommon either. I don't think it's extraordinary or deviant, really. (xxxvi)

This is not so clear, basically because it's not unambiguously obvious what Leigh's three "it's's" refer to. But since it doesn't seem to me that the opening scene is a rape, what I'm *hoping* Leigh means by his first use of "it's" is that what happens at the beginning is more complex than the word "rape" suggests. While I realize that rape *can* be called "common male behav-

iour," I also hope that the kind of behaviour he has in mind here, and which he says is "very common" and not "extraordinary or deviant" is aggression, rather than rape. This, at any rate, is the way I choose to *hear* what he's saying and I suggest that it can partially be understood in the light of a certain kind of theoretical reflection—a kind I propose to illustrate, since there is no shortage of possible examples, from a book I happen to be reading at the moment of writing this passage, Henry Staten's *Nietzsche's Voice*. Having just asked the question as to whether "we know what we have said when we use the terms 'erotic' or 'sexual' to describe the character of the fundamental drive energy in Freud?" Staten adds this:

Very attentive reading of Freud's later works shows how confused are his attempts to keep eros separate from aggressiveness and the death drive, so much so that Laplanche is driven to conclude that "the death drive is the very soul, the constitutive principle, of libidinal circulation." And Leo Bersani argues



that “we don’t move from love to aggressiveness in *Civilization and Its Discontents*; rather, love is redefined, re-presented, as aggressiveness.” (99)

In short, Staten claims that, “if Freudian libido contains a strong element of aggression and destructiveness, Nietzschean will to power never takes place without a pleasurable excitation that there is no reason not to call erotic” (100).

Of course, it is one thing to give one’s assent to the notion that the libido, or erotic energy, or even love may be inherently aggressive on the level of theory and another to contemplate the particular acts of aggression that Leigh stages for us in *Naked*. But it is important to keep in mind that the two worst—and easily most violent—of these acts (both of them entirely unprovoked) are the rape of Sophie (by Jeremy) and the savage beating Johnny receives from a passing gang of youths shortly after he has already been beaten up by the poster man. Not, obviously, that Johnny’s later status as a victim himself in any way excuses his earlier cruelty to Sophie and the drunken dancer—in which he manages to both physically abuse and also psychically humiliate these two women. Those scenes remain painful to contemplate. Nevertheless, they certainly involve a lesser degree of violence than the rape and the beating up and they therefore encourage us to see that we have a responsibility to make discriminations. And not just between different kinds and degrees of physical violence, but between physical and non-physical (or verbal) violence (or aggression) too.

I’m thinking of Johnny’s abrasive manner here. Of such things as, for example, his reaction to the kiss Louise gives him when she has just got back home from work and—to her complete surprise, since he has given her no prior warning—discovered him there with Sophie:

LOUISE: What are you doin’ ‘ere? You look like shit.

JOHNNY: Just trying to blend in with the surroundings.

(LOUISE leans over and kisses him.)

JOHNNY: (Sings, to the tune of Handel’s “Hallelujah!”) Halitosis! Halitosis, Halitosis! (11)

Perhaps it could be argued that in this case Johnny is giving back as good as he gets (“You look like shit”). But what excuse is there for his response to Brian’s claim that, since he knows he was “here in the past, before [he] was born,” he also knows he’s “gonna be here in the future after [he’s] died”:

JOHNNY: I see. And in this alternative existence, did you still ‘ave the same noxious body odour? (46)

Surely this is simply unpleasant, gratuitously so, the bad manners of an especially difficult adolescent. Maybe so. But it’s worth noting that, even though he does tell Johnny that “[t]here’s no need to be personal,” neither Brian here, nor Louise earlier, seems really offended by Johnny’s rudeness. On the contrary, in fact, they both seem to feel that it has a legitimate place in the kind of thrust and parry (Laurel and Hardy-style) that all three of them seem to think of as being necessary to good conversation.

It’s interesting, in this connection, to reflect on the signifi-

cance of the fact that, while (in his interview) Leigh strongly objects when he is “accused of being patronizing,” he claims he doesn’t “mind people saying that [he is] merciless” at all (xxiii). The point, I take it, is not just that there are far worse things than a lack of politeness (including being patronizing), but that a refusal to allow oneself to be constrained by the obligation to be nice (or to show mercy) might be one of the essential preconditions for liveliness. Or, to put it another way, for avoiding the kind of deadliness that Johnny complains of (to Louise) early on: “I’ve seen more life in an open grave” (14).

Thus, for example, as Brian shares his sandwich lunch with Johnny, we get the following exchange:

JOHNNY: Did you make these yourself?

BRIAN: I did, yeah.

JOHNNY: I thought so. (*He glances down the street.*) Well, listen, I might be back in a couple of minutes.

(BRIAN laughs briefly.) (50)

Instead of being offended by Johnny’s pointed refusal to do the expected thing—expressing gratitude for the sandwich and paying Brian the predictable compliment for having made it himself—Brian is amused. Because, to recall what Johnny says to Louise earlier (“whatever else you can say about me, I’m not fuckin’ bored!” [21]), besides his not being bored, Johnny is not boring either. His brief comment on Brian’s sandwich is another instance of the cheekiness that Johnny cultivates and prides himself on. “I know,” he tells the dancing woman, “it’s a bit cheeky [his having knocked on her door—]” “I said I’d come and say ‘ello to Isadora Duncan”] but, er ... I’m a cheeky young monkey!” (51) Or as he tells the waitress the following day: “I’m cheeky, aren’t I?” (60)

### What should we think of Johnny?

But if, on the one hand, it has to be admitted that Johnny never comes close to doing anything that would remotely justify Louise’s threatening *him* in the way she eventually (and quite magnificently) threatens Jeremy—first inviting him to undo his flies; then, when he has done so, suddenly producing a large kitchen knife in her hand and asking him if he wants her “to slice [his] prick off and shove it up [his] arse”; and finally, as “*he slinks towards the door,*” exclaiming “Maggot dick!” (83)—on the other hand, it also has to be said that there *ought* to be something insufferable about him. On two grounds. First because what Pierre Hadot has said about Socrates—that he “harassed his interlocutors with questions which put *themselves* into question, forcing them to pay attention to and take care of themselves” (Hadot 89)—can be said about Johnny too. And harassment is seldom welcomed, especially when, as here, it can so easily seem to smack of self-righteousness. Hadot notes, furthermore, that, while the Stoic philosopher Epictetus praised the Socratic method, he also “emphasizes that, in his day, it is no longer easy to practice it: ‘Nowadays, especially in Rome, it is not at all a safe business.’ Epictetus pictures a philosopher trying to have a Socratic dialogue with a consular personage, and ending up receiving a fist in the face” (117).



Second, there is the question as to what we ought to make of Johnny's treatment of Louise at the end of the film. Put simply, she takes him back in and, since he has been badly hurt, she looks after him. We have learned earlier, in an exchange she has had with Sophie, that Louise and Johnny "went out for a year" (36). And there is an especially touching scene towards the end, which nicely reveals an at least partially shared past, when Louise and Johnny lie next to one another on a bed and sing a song about Manchester. It ends up as follows:

Oh, I don't want to roam.  
I want to get back 'ome  
To rainy  
Manchester ...

It is obviously a sentimental song—one apparently that "Leigh used to sing ... with his friends in Habonim ('The Builders'), the international socialist Jewish youth movement he joined as a schoolboy" (Coveney 29)—and Johnny adds the appropriately ironical (sentimentality-puncturing) remark "I've got an 'ard-on" (79), after which Louise's smile and the tender gesture by which she "*touches his cheek with the back of her hand*" (79) suggest that she at least is now convinced they can start again.

It seems clear to her, shortly after this, that they have an understanding: she will go into work and hand in her resignation; they will then return to Manchester together, as a couple. So what are we to make of the fact that, after allowing her to go ahead and quit her job, Johnny then pockets the 380 pounds Jeremy has left behind and takes off himself, effectively leaving Louise in the lurch?

After claiming (in the Fuller interview) that the problem he "present[s] the audience with is whether to like or dislike [Johnny]," Leigh goes on to say something that I think applies just as much to the problem as to how we should think of aggression or violence as to the question as to how we should think of Johnny: he says that, "if the film works, you go away from it locked in debate"; that "[t]here are no easy answers, really" (xxxix). But if we apply it just—as Leigh intended—to Johnny, how, then, in the light of what he does to Louise in the end, can we possibly continue to *like* Johnny?

Perhaps Johnny can be seen at the end as having helped to liberate Louise—or, better yet, as having helped her to liberate herself. By her own admission, she finds her job boring, so perhaps she is better off out of it, and also better off—since she clearly prefers it to London—returning to Manchester, even without Johnny, who, to be fair, never actually said he'd go with her, anyway. Possibly. But the fact remains that he has betrayed her trust and this is shocking, and not at all likable.

At the end of the film, we see Johnny hopping down the road, making off as fast as he can on one good leg and without a stick to support the other leg, the one with the badly bruised ankle. He is presumably heading back to the streets, which I referred to earlier as the urban equivalent of *King Lear's* heath (on which, see too Coveney 20). And, since it so vividly evokes a sense of just *how* cold it can get out there, it's worth recalling

a bit more of what he said earlier, when the waitress from the Jubilee Café ordered him to leave her place:

An', er, listen, love ...I hope that when you're tucked up tonight, all snug and warm underneath your tear-sodden fuckin' duvet in your ankle-length Emily Bronte windin'-sheet, that you spare a thought for me, with me head in a puddle of cold dog's piss. An' I hope that you dream of me. An' I hope that you wake up screamin'. (70)

The two things about the film's ending that seem reasonably certain, then, are (i) that Johnny is going to get cold and (ii) that he is necessarily going to be doing what Lear recommended, and what most of us manage to avoid doing—for whatever combination of reasons, he is going to "expose [him]self to feel what wretches feel" (*King Lear* 111,iv,34).

• • • •

Finally, what I most admire about *Naked* is the intensity with which Leigh manages through Johnny to convey the kind of concern for "the 'meaning of life'" that the critic F.R. Leavis referred to in his essay on Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

Such a concern, felt as the question "What for—what ultimately for?" is implicitly asked in all the greatest art, from which we get, not what we are likely to call an "answer," but the communication of a felt significance; something that confirms our sense of life as more than a mere linear succession of days, a matter of time as measured by the clock—"tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow..."(46)

*Naked* doesn't propose any answers but it does pose the question in a particularly challenging and memorable way.

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*The Wind Will Carry Us*

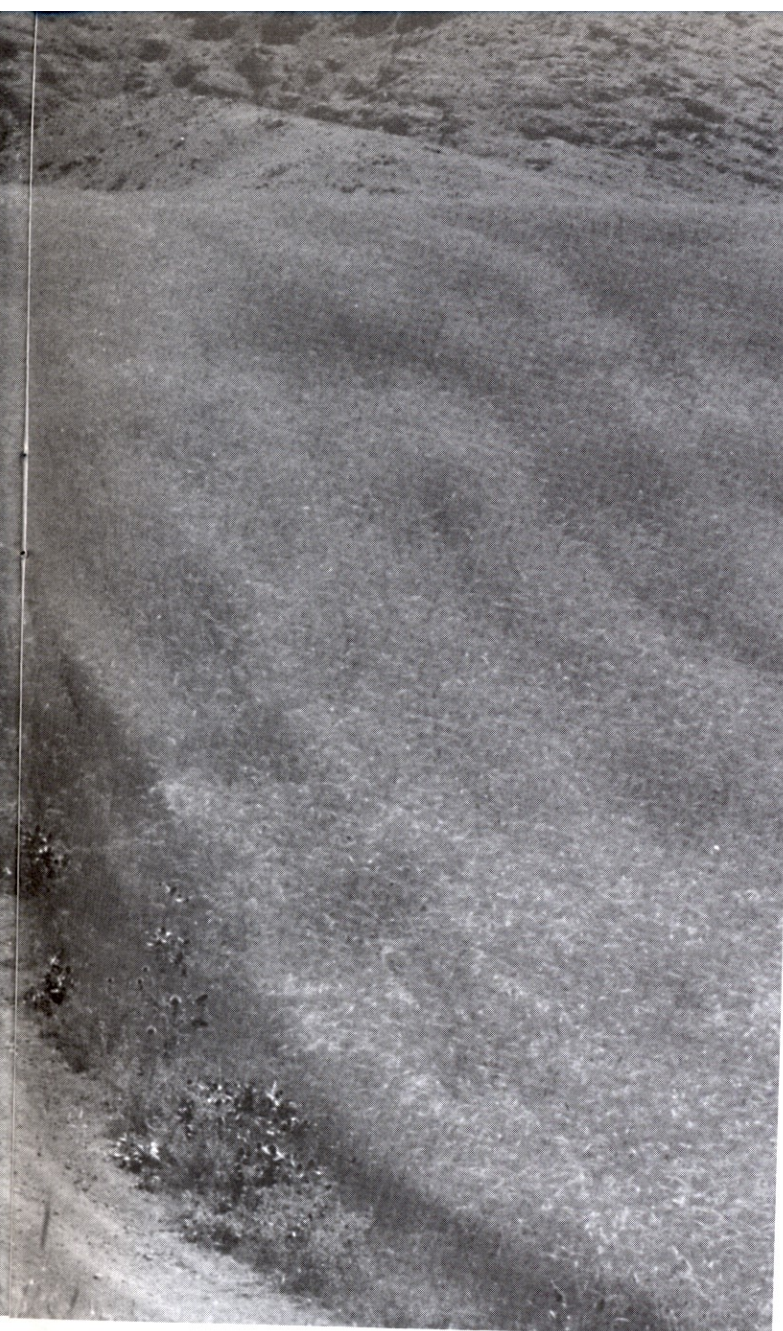
## THE IMPORT/ EXPORT BUSINESS

### The Road to Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*

by Devin Orgeron

The road is a recurring trope in the cinema of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami and is the explicit backbone of his 1997 film *Taste of Cherry*. Kiarostami's films repeatedly use the road to comment critically upon international and particularly non-Western cinema's longstanding and conflicted relationships with the image-machines of America and of Hollywood in particular. Kiarostami's roads are a key element in his cinematic reflexivity, his running dialogue with the history of images, major cinematic movements, and the cult of authorship. Kiarostami is a filmmaker who, for the past decade, has been subjected to an unprecedented number of auteurist similes: he is like Godard, like Angelopoulos, like Antonioni, like De Sica, etc. It is, in fact, not difficult to detect in Kiarostami's films various philosophical or aesthetic points of comparison, for his work has important formal and political ties to those filmmakers already mentioned. But what follows is only partly an attempt to situate Kiarostami's work within this matrix of his cinematic predecessors and con-





*The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999): Another film about filmmaking, this one explores a filmmaker attempting to document a folk ritual. Obsessed with repetition and futility, the film returns repeatedly to images of the filmmaker driving to the top of a hill in an attempt to make a phone-call. These images rhyme with images of a dung beetle, consumed in its own obsessive, Sisyphean motion.

might think of it as an early cinematic "mini-genre") that depicted the horrors of motorized travel.<sup>2</sup> Though comedic, these films, which were in vogue for nearly a decade, trained the cinematic eye on images of destruction: train-wrecks, automobile collisions, and other transportation disasters. Progress, these films humorously suggested, came at a price.

This idea would take on additional political and cultural weight, however, at the end of the Second World War when "progress" itself was frequently figured in terms of American cultural influence overseas. The road as critical component in the service of these critiques was first firmly established in post-war Italian cinema. Kiarostami, though he is famously loath to list his "influences," has acknowledged his admiration of and debt to the Italian neo-realists and his alienation when faced with Hollywood films from the same period (Italian and American films were screened regularly in the Iran of Kiarostami's youth). Neo-realism was, in many ways, a reaction against the Hollywood artifice Kiarostami found in those formative film-going years, so distant from his experience of life. Often no less romantic or melodramatic, these films presented the emerging artist with something simultaneously new and *familiar*. In a 1997 interview with Nassia Hamid, Kiarostami explains this apparent contradiction with characteristic matter-of-fact aplomb: "for the first time I saw people who were very close to the people who were around me in Iran."<sup>3</sup>

These people who seemed so close to Kiarostami were often engaged in narratives of mobility. Vittorio de Sica's *Ladri di Biciclette* (1948), with its post-war landscapes of desolation, its

temporaries. It is, more importantly, an argument about Kiarostami's remarkable imagistic consistency and a quest for an answer to the perhaps obvious question: Where does Kiarostami's interest in the road come from?

### Post-War European Cinema and The Road to Kiarostami

Since the turn-of-the-century, the technology of cinema and the technology of transportation have been intimately bound. Early cinema borrowed from the situation of locomotive travel both for its presentational organization and for its themes.<sup>1</sup> As films "about" trains entering stations lost their appeal, early filmmakers turned their attention to the automobile or, in the case of magician-turned-filmmaker Georges Méliès, toward fantastic vehicles of the future. These early films were both curious and skeptical about the future of mechanized mobility. The Lumière Brothers, Georges Méliès, Cecil Hepworth and others contributed to an important early cinematic trend (we

1 For a highly readable account of this history, see Ian Christie's *The Last Machine: Early Cinema and the Birth of the Modern World*. London: BBC Educational, 1994. Lynne Kirby's "Male Hysteria and Early Cinema" accounts for the gender-based psychological impact of the cinema/transportation pairing on turn of the century audiences. See "Male Hysteria and Early Cinema. *Male Trouble*. Ed. Constance Penley and Sharon Willis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

2 Though not a transportation film, in 1995 Kiarostami directed a short segment for *Lumière et compagnie*, an anthology of short films by various well-known directors made using the Cinématographe, the Lumière camera/projector. There are curious formal similarities between the Lumière's cinema and Kiarostami's. Kiarostami, like his turn of the century predecessors, has developed a long-take cinematic style remarkable, in part, for its minimalist approach to editing.

3 "Near and Far: Abbas Kiarostami with Nassia Hamid." *Sight and Sound* 7:2 (Feb. 1997): 24.





*Taste of Cherry*: American film-school culture on the outskirts of Tehran.

stinging images of social and economic displacement, and its narrative structure revolving around its protagonist's tenuous access to mobility, is a clear influence, and Kiarostami's earliest work is markedly descended from its modes.<sup>4</sup> *Bread and Alley* (1970), Kiarostami's first film, is a wordless eleven minute film tracing a boy's sometimes frightening, obstacle-laden walk home from school. Like the young boy in de Sica's film, for whom the spectator feels an unyielding sympathy, the boy protagonist in Kiarostami's film is irresistible as he struggles to complete his seemingly simple task of making it home. Both in its presentation and in its reliance on the emotional significance of children, it is Kiarostami's ode to neo-realism (or at least to de Sica's brand of neo-realism). It also establishes the road (or, more generally, mobility) as a central and guiding metaphorical idea for Kiarostami – an idea that has followed the filmmaker through his most recent work.

*Ladri di Biciclette* also contributed to Kiarostami's subtle brand of cultural criticism. De Sica's film about mobility and access contains within it a wry commentary on the ease with which American culture, especially American cinematic culture, travels across national borders. In the film, Antonio's hard-earned employment requires that he affix posters for American films (one featuring Rita Hayworth) onto the walls of the city that contains him. *Bread and Alley's* swinging contemporary jazz soundtrack achieves much the same effect, though at the aural level. Kiarostami's use of the road as a metaphor for cultural mobility, then, has its roots in the neo-realist films that so intrigued him as a young man.

One of Kiarostami's early short features, *The Traveler* (1974), also concerns itself with mobility, access and the importance of images. In the film, Qasem (Hassan Darabi), a Soccer obsessed village boy, journeys to Tehran hoping to see an important match. His difficult to finance journey is facilitated in part by an image-making scam he and a friend perpetrate on the local villagers. Setting up a camera and inviting passers-by to pose (for a small sum), the boys appear to be operating an amateur portrait studio. But there's a punch-line here, because the camera is without film.

Like its Italian predecessors, *The Traveler* achieves much of

it emotional efficacy by focusing on the semi-innocent point-of-view of a child navigating a difficult, often confusing landscape. Kiarostami's film also emphasizes the centrality of the journey itself over the presumed "goal" of the journey (the soccer metaphor seems to be a deliberate one as well). Qasem, like so many Kiarostami characters (children and adults), *overshoots* his target, sleeps through the presumably life-altering soccer match, but is changed by his experience all the same.

Kiarostami frequently allows photographic or cinematic technologies to enter his highly self-aware narratives and in *The Traveler* the joke is quite plain: image making is a method by which to become mobile. This seemingly autobiographical idea takes on deeper significance in Kiarostami's later films where the process of filmmaking is rendered strikingly visible. A complex and extended study of it takes place in Kiarostami's *Close Up* (1990). An account of Hossain Sabzian (who plays himself in the film) and his cinematic scam – he pretends to a rich family that he is the renowned Iranian filmmaker, Moshen Makhmalbaf — the film proposes the equally fascinating idea of image-making as key to social mobility. Many of the film's concluding images feature Sabzian and Makhmalbaf himself aboard a motorbike, literalizing the film's interest in the connections between social and physical movement.

The road is also central to the French New Wave and most especially to the 1960s cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, an outspoken proponent of Kiarostami. Godard's films of the 1960s were also relentlessly frank in their statements regarding American culture and its mobility (think: *Alphaville* [1965], *Week end* [1967], and *Pierrot le fou* [1968]). Godard simultaneously made his most eloquent and most sophomoric statement regarding the impact of American imagery abroad in *Breathless* (1959), with the death and final stasis of Michel, a character entranced, mobilized, and duped by the impossible masculine mobility of Humphrey Bogart.

Jean-Luc Godard, when asked to define the cinema, once famously remarked that the cinema is a gun and a girl, an obvious reference to his interest in 1940s "B" gangster and Noir films. To this equation might also be added the automobile and the road, both of which are a fundamental part of



Godard's cinematic practice at least through the late 1960s. Godard's fascination with the automobile and the road is rooted in his fascination with (and skepticism of) all things "American."<sup>5</sup> The automobile is an inarguably American item, and Godard enhances and highlights its Americanness by frequently using American cars in his films. The automobile, however, is also metaphorically important to Godard's cinema. It is the embodiment of transportability and signifies the global movement of American culture.

Kiarostami's films are similarly self-reflexive, similarly skeptical of the curious mobility of Western culture. One of Kiarostami's early Godardian experiments is explicitly concerned with highways. *The Solution* (1978) is a highly formal, eleven-minute film following a man on an isolated mountain road as he rolls a newly repaired tire to his stranded automobile. This short film addresses several key Kiarostamian themes – themes that his feature-length films of the 80s and 90s would revolve more explicitly around. Key among them is the idea of *transportable culture* – here, of the imported variety. The film's protagonist drives a French Citroën, wears a Vietnam-era American flak jacket, and his actions are set to Western classical music. Like his Italian and French narrative predecessors, the protagonist in this short film is surrounded by signifiers of cultural mobility at the moment of his own problematic stasis.

This interest in the road and its ability to comment on the reach of non-domestic cultures has been at the center of a number of national cinemas. German filmmaker Wim Wenders, whose connection to the road is legendary and continues to this day (the name of his production company, *Road Movies Filmproduktion*, says it all), has his characters express their disdain over the fact that "the yanks have colonized (their) unconsciousness" in *Kings of the Road* (1976).<sup>6</sup> In his films and in his comments, Wenders returns repeatedly to the topic of his conflicted relationship to American culture, and his films are loaded with the cast-away refuse of American popular culture: juke-boxes, American records, signs for American soda-pop manufacturers, etc.

Though his recent, American-made films have diverged somewhat from his original method, like Kiarostami's work Wenders' movies seemed markedly descended from neo-realism. His frequently discussed interest in the sometimes excruciating duration of events (especially driving) manifested in a cinema, like Kiarostami's, reliant on the long-take. These limit-defying mobile shots also glimpsed signifying transitional landscapes, almost Bazinian in their extremes. Wenders' occasionally off-putting, post-war European contemplativeness was, also like Kiarostami's work, often tempered by the naïve, sometimes starkly learned point of view of children – an idea both directors gleaned from post-war Italian cinema. But Wenders' key metaphorical expression of modernity was mediated through images of traffic – a doubly significant idea in Wenders' road films which, as indicated above, were obsessed as much with the international traffic of cultures and ideas as in the physical traffic of bodies and vehicles. Traffic is also a crucial Kiarostamian theme and it figures prominently in *Breaktime* (1972) and *Regularly or Irregularly* (1981), both fifteen minute films featuring the sometimes dangerous act of cross-

ing busy highways, as well as in *Fellow Citizen* (1983), a fifty-two minute film exploring a traffic cop's attempts to direct the flow of vehicles.

## Two-Way Traffic: Standing at The Euro-Persian Cross-roads

In his ties to neo-realism, the French New Wave, and the New German Cinema, Kiarostami is implicated in the circle of Western auteurs similarly interested in the metaphorical potential of the road. But we won't be abandoning him there. Kiarostami's use of the road as a critical or metaphorical tool also has domestic roots that extend much further back. In fact, the journey was an especially important philosophical and poetic conceit in the middle ages when Persian culture found itself at what Godfrey Chesire has identified as its own metaphorical crossroads – with Western, empirical thought forking roughly to the left and Eastern esoteric thought forking roughly to the right.<sup>7</sup>

Laura Mulvey, in an article on Kiarostami written for *Sight and Sound* around the time of *Taste of Cherry*'s British opening, explains this road/cinema connection in the following terms:

Many Kiarostami films feature the processes of driving and looking from a car at the surrounding landscape. These long travelling shots draw attention to the road itself, giving a literal presence to the journey. But most of all the presence of the road draws attention to something these landscapes and cinema have in common. The landscapes are marked by human labour, and the roads and paths in particular bear witness to human movement which has worn them into traces along the countryside. While human life and history may well appear only as an illusion on screen, these traces are a reality in themselves. The cinema has a similar relationship to the traces of the past, preserving the appearance of things across time.<sup>8</sup>

Mulvey identifies the preservational capacity of both the cinema and the road – a similarity that, I think, Kiarostami himself is both aware of and intrigued by. Roads, like film, record and contain human activity, human mobility. In Kiarostami's films, however, the "traces" to which Mulvey refers are themselves often traces of cinematic activity, mementos of the cinema's global reach. Kiarostami's roads, in this way, are often roads through cinematic culture.

4 Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954), which translates literally to "the road," is another example of post-war Italian cinema's interest in questions of mobility.

5 In this way, Godard's images prefigure the words of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard whose book *America* also gives expression to the American culture machine and its international effects. Interestingly, both French thinkers locate their criticisms on the American road – Godard symbolically, through his cinematic referentiality and Baudrillard literally in his production of a road-based, critical travelogue. See Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1986).

6 Werner Herzog's films are also relentlessly mobile: *Strozek* (1977) is his literal road movie about an unlikely group of German misfits on the road in America. The idea has also remained relevant, extending into contemporary German cinema. Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1999) is a postmodern exploration of post-war German mobility, and its much-discussed MTV-era form is its imported inheritance.

7 See Godfrey Chesire "How to Read Kiarostami." *Cineaste* 25:4 (2000): 13.

8 See Laura Mulvey's "Kiarostami's Uncertainty Principle." *Sight and Sound* (June 1998): 27



This idea is at the heart of Kiarostami's oeuvre and is especially central to *Taste of Cherry*, a film whose narrative structure, defined by a series of dusty and circuitous roads in the hills just outside of Teheran, suggests the predicament of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema and the metaphorical twists, turns, and dead-ends filmmakers like Kiarostami face. So in addition to recording human mobility, roads and films, when they unite, can also suggest the frustrations of predetermined mobility and the dilemma of immobility.

The notion of the journey does form the foundation of Kiarostami's cinema. With the exception of Godfrey Chesire, however, few critics have attempted to trace the Eastern or, for that matter, non-cinematic roots of Kiarostami's roads. In an article for *Cineaste* entitled "How to Read Kiarostami," Chesire comments on the critical importance of the narrative structure of the journey to the *form* of Iranian philosophical thought. Chesire turns to the scholarly research of French Iranologist Henry Corbin, a scholar whose writings explored the links between Western and Persian thought. Via Corbin, Chesire identifies the importance of the journey or quest-like structure to two key Persian thinkers of the Middle Ages, Abu Ali Ibn (known as Avicenna in the West) and Shihabuddin Suhrawardi. Chesire writes that both philosophers "gave their most evocative accounts of "Oriental philosophy" in fictional tales that recount a journey or quest, a narrative paradigm significantly shared by most of Kiarostami's films."<sup>9</sup>

Kiarostami's films, then, are in conversation as much with a tradition of Persian philosophy and literature – a tradition which has historically pondered notions of Western cultural influence – as they are with the history of cinema. Kiarostami's cinema is, one might suggest, positioned at an intersection between traditions that have used the form of the journey to comment upon the contemporary condition.

Interestingly, Kiarostami, while studying for his entrance exams at the school of Fine Arts in Teheran, was himself literally employed *at the intersection*. He was a traffic cop, an occupation explored semi-autobiographically in the above-mentioned *Fellow Citizen*. In a way, however, all of his films are about traffic – literal, automotive traffic, to a certain extent, but also the transhistorical, transnational (and, in this sense, postmodern) traffic of ideas, words and images – and the effect this other type of traffic has upon human mobility, both physical and psychical. Traffic, it seems, has become one of Kiarostami's metaphors for contemporary existence.

Nassia Hamid, in her interview with Kiarostami, asked the filmmaker to comment on the self-conscious exposure of the filmmaking apparatus in his so-called Koker trilogy – *Where Is My Friend's Home?* (1987), *And Life Goes On...* (1992), and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) – a process of exposure which, by now, has become something of a Kiarostamian icon. Even his films that are not explicitly about the process of filmmaking are marked by booms falling into the frame, members of the crew interrupting the narrative fantasy, etc. The question itself invokes the notion of Brechtian distancing – an influence Kiarostami, in his response, is careful not to deny. He is equally careful, however, to complicate the issue further by, once again, citing a more traditional, or at least more local source in a way

that also suggests the parallels Kiarostami detects between the act of directing a film and the act of directing traffic:

I found distancing in *Taazieh* (the traditional folk theatre depicting the Shi'ite account of the murder of Imam Hossein, the son of Mohammed, by the tyrant Yazid, which is performed each year on the anniversary of the event)...This year I went to a village near Teheran to watch a *Taazieh*...at the moment Yazid is supposed to chop off Imam Hossein's head, they were served tea, and Yazid signaled with a nod for his to be placed next to him as he continued with the decapitation. These things really helped me. I saw how nothing could affect this scene. For example the lion, which was played by a very old man wearing a lion skin, became tired – and went to lie down in the shade of a boulder. He began to smoke a cigarette. A smoking lion. I didn't see anyone laugh at this. He could be the lion and not be the lion.<sup>10</sup>

Kiarostami points to the free flow of traffic he allows in and out of his own films: his films are open to both traditional and modern influences in precisely the same way that they are, to the spectator, open (for some, frustratingly so) to interpretation. His words also prefigure a parallel moment at the end of *Taste of Cherry*. *Taste of Cherry's* narrative follows the largely circular path of a man, Mr. Badii (Homayoun Ershadi), seeking assistance in his attempt at suicide in the hills outside of Teheran. The film ends ambiguously, though – the viewer is unsure whether this character's attempts have been successful. To complicate matters further, the narrative proper is followed by a coda wherein Mr. Badii exits his tomb-like ditch and, like the man in the lion-suit, lights a cigarette and approaches the director, Abbas Kiarostami. For a moment he is Mr. Badii and not Mr. Badii.

*Taste of Cherry* begins in the interior of Mr. Badii's Range Rover. A series of shots establishes the location, an urban environment not at all typical of Kiarostami's films. The traffic at the beginning of the film seems to be primarily a traffic in bodies as men approach Mr. Badii's slowly moving car offering their service to him without asking what that service might involve. These are men in search of labor, perhaps the precise sort of labor Mulvey addresses in her comments regarding Kiarostami's sign-laden roads. The irony of this moment, though, will not be fully realized until later in the film when we learn that Mr. Badii, who refuses these initial offers of assistance, does indeed seek a laborer.

His journey, we later learn, is an attempt to convince those he encounters to help him the next day by returning to his pre-dug burial site either to rescue him, if he fails in his attempt at suicide, or bury him if he is successful. From its opening frame onward, however, the film is relentlessly (though slowly) mobile as Mr. Badii returns repeatedly to the site with a different potential assistant each time: A young Kurdish soldier, an Afghani seminarian, and an elderly taxidermist. The last of these three finally, though reluctantly, agrees to help Mr. Badii.

This litany of "foreigners," of outsiders, contributes to the film's deep feelings of alienation throughout. Each character



narrates himself as a stranger in a strange land, a land of ill-defined borders — definitions that are certainly pertinent to Kiarostami's own situation.

But this film with a self-reflexive coda also has a highly illuminating preamble that, I think, perfectly encapsulates the Kiarostamian notion of traffic. As Mr. Badii makes his way out of the city, shots alternate from roughly his point of view as he gazes upon the changing landscape he traverses to shots of Mr. Badii. These scenes are shot by a cameraman who has, it seems, become Mr. Badii's passenger and his real accomplice. Through the vehicle's windows, however, and faintly on the soundtrack are the traces of human labor so central to Mulvey's reading. The city itself is expanding outward and all around Mr. Badii are signs of this process of building, signs of "progress," signs of what we might wish to call "urban traffic."

Early on Mr. Badii encounters a pair of children "playing cars" in an abandoned Volkswagen. Their exchange seems almost incidental. They are on the screen briefly and might merely remind the viewer of earlier Kiarostami films that took children as their protagonists and of Kiarostami's neo-realist inheritance. Unlike those earlier children, however, these youngsters are merely playing at mobility, mimicking its rituals while remaining static. The moment hints at a change or interruption in the *flow of traffic*. As if to reinforce this idea, Mr. Badii, who makes a fairly elaborate U-turn several minutes later, passes them once again. Badii, the imagery would indicate, is moving in circles while the children, desirous as they might be, are unable to move at all.

Shortly after this encounter, Mr. Badii chances upon another indicator of these changing traffic patterns. He passes a brightly colored and isolated phone booth from which emanates one side of a heated conversation. As is so often the case in Kiarostami's films, as the man in the booth screams about his precarious economic situation we never see him. Spectators are only privileged to a long take of Mr. Badii who seems distressed by the conversation but moves on with a renewed plan to offer this man money for his services which, at this point in the film, are not only undisclosed but carry with them a decidedly perverse undertone. If we read Mr. Badii as a surrogate for Kiarostami — a reading invited by the film's coda as well as Mr. Badii's own attempt to direct his own fate in the film—this refusal to offer reverse shots, this prolonged gaze upon the mobile urbanite, is a profound statement regarding the occasionally uncritical idolatry of auteurism. It suggests that, in spite of the circularity of his journey, in spite of his own desperate immobility, the spectatorial gaze is trained not on the cinematic subject — the filmmaker's roads, landscapes, and characters — but on the director himself.

Kiarostami's own relationship to the subject of mobility is a decidedly conflicted one. His films are, essentially, exports. In a 1991 interview for *Cineaste*, Kiarostami joked that films currently rank with pistachio nuts, carpets, and oil as Iran's major exports. *Taste of Cherry*, even more than his earlier films, is an especially dense, poetic and, I think his critics would argue, non-populist (read: export ready) film. But it is also a film about reclaiming or returning to the local and the

dangers of a culture that too readily embraces "exports." This language of imports and exports, a language so central to Iran's history, is also the language of traffic. *Taste of Cherry* clearly testifies against the one way movement of this traffic.

An especially wry joke in the film's preamble plays with this notion. Mr. Badii, after being threatened by the economically strapped worker who suspects that he is making sexual advances, spies a man in a bright red shirt moving rather chaotically and picking up debris in the valley below the road he and his Range Rover traverse. Mr. Badii tracks the man's movement across the valley floor and, after a series of cuts between the man and Mr. Badii's outward gaze, he drives ahead and pauses to wait for the man. As he waits a large dump truck ironically dumping loads of dirt into a ditch (precisely, we learn later, the services Mr. Badii seeks) can be seen outside of the driver side window. As the man enters the frame the letters U-C-L-A can clearly be read across the front of his shirt. This is, of course, a not-so-subtle joke about the reach of American culture, its ability to move about freely and globally. It is also a joke on the film-school culture that has deemed Kiarostami auteur of the moment. In a more general way, however, it is a comment on the notion of displacement, an idea that permeates all of Kiarostami's work and is especially central to *Taste of Cherry*.

The children encountered earlier, the man in the phone booth, and in fact all of the characters in the film, especially Mr. Badii himself, are characters in search of place and each exhibits varying degrees of comfort or confusion with regard to this search. The fact that these characters, and each character Mr. Badii encounters in the film after the bag collector, discuss their not-local origins suggests that, in Kiarostami's world, we are all away from home. Or perhaps, to use Dorothy's words from that yellow-brick paved studio road film made at the apex of Hollywood's Golden Age, "There's no place like home." The road arises in *Taste of Cherry* and in much of Kiarostami's work as a reminder of these facts. It also suggests, in a not unrelated way, the *dislocation* of Kiarostami's cinema which, like the characters in his films, has an uncomfortable relationship to that place called "home."

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As of fall 2002 **Devin Orgeron** will be an Assistant Professor of Film Studies at North Carolina State University. His book in progress, 'Road Movies: The Transportation of American Cinema,' examines film's fascination with technologies of mobility from the turn-of-the-century to the present.

9 Chesire, 13.  
10 Hamid, 24.





## THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME

### Failed Male Friendship in De Palma's *Snake Eyes*

by David Greven

If Brian De Palma is the most abused and misunderstood of great American directors—and I believe that he is—then the praise he has, on occasion, been given proves as ornery a problem as the scorn. “His new trash heart is the ultimate De Palma joke,” the last line of Pauline Kael’s review of *Carrie* (1976) affirmed. Robert Philip Kolker reserves his praise for two works that presumably evince a similar jokey knowingness:

Brian De Palma has made a career of the most superficial imitations of the most superficial aspects of Hitchcock’s style, worked through a mysogyny [sic] and violence that manifest a contempt for the audience by his films (though in *Scarface* [1983] and *The Untouchables* [1987] he has shown a talent for a somewhat more grandiloquent allusiveness) (161).

Be it effusive or limited, the praise is limited to a celebration of De Palma’s fiendish prankster mentality, appropriate to his categorization as one of the 70s “Movie Brats” of the New Hollywood. In this essay, I want to examine *Snake Eyes* (SE) as an

important De Palma film that synthesizes all of these issues. No De Palma film has been more abused or misunderstood; and no De Palma film has more thoroughly eschewed knowing meta-textual humorlessness—either that of the parodistic toppling of cinematic archetypes or the winking quotation of earlier forms—insisting, instead, on a grim singlemindedness. I do not mean to suggest that De Palma’s metatextual references to the work of other directors—Hitchcock, of course, but also Welles, Powell, Bunuel, and others, not the least of whom is De Palma himself—are evacuated from SE. The opening 12 minute long Steadicam tracking shot manages to parody both Welles and Scorsese while extending the possibilities of cinematic real time Kubrick explores in the duel scene of *Barry Lyndon* (a key parallel, since De Palma, like Kubrick here, will agonizingly sustain rancorous relations between men). My emphasis on the deliberate humorlessness of SE means to direct attention to the seriousness of De Palma’s efforts here—a seriousness that flays open the body of his work to reveal the wounded logic of his own suspense genre. I am going to focus on the film’s foregrounding of one manifestation of De Palma’s overarching theme of betrayal—the failure of male friendship—discussing its deployment in SE, its continuous development in the other films, and its relationship to that thorny, ever-present issue of misogyny in De Palma’s work.

Both announcing and embodying the determined humorless-



ness of SE, the protagonist, Rick Santoro (Nicholas Cage), provides the least likable and sympathetic source of audience identification in any De Palma film. A corrupt cop who takes bribes, Rick is introduced to us in such a manner that his repulsiveness leaps out. He's a playboy charmer-manqué, an aggressive screamer who hurls, like the most nightmarish sports hooligan imaginable, raucous praise at the boxer, Lincoln Tyler (Stan Shaw), whose match he is on his way to see. On his way to the match, Rick carouses and cajoles everyone around him mercilessly. To signify the dark side of Rick's glad-handing, he chases down scared-looking petty criminal Cyrus (Luis Guzman), a denizen of this dark Atlantic City underworld, pummeling and bloodying him in order to extract dirty money further dirtied by the stain of Cyrus's blood. This literal blood money becomes an important trope in this film—synecdochic of the symbology of blood that courses through De Palma's work. The mutable De Palma trope of blood, in this moment, represents Rick's disregard for the law he represents, his seeming contempt for others' lives, and his inextricable connection to the miasmic underworld of corruption he presumably inhabits with gleeful impunity.

Cage's nonstop loudness of gesture and decibel level, matched to the relentlessness of De Palma's tracking shot design, which perpetually yanks us back to Rick's body, are both crucial to the premise of SE. Much as we may instantly dislike Rick, much as we attempt to resist him, we are ineluctably connected to him. The tracking shot traps us in a viselike way that anticipates the way both Rick and we will be trapped by the terrible plot of corruption, murder, and betrayal that will soon—has already begun to—close in upon Rick, and us.

Rick's repellent persona radically destabilizes the overlapping suspense-thriller-noir genres—which typically rely upon a “good” man's descent into the hell of avarice and mayhem which he restores to a purgatorial sense of corrected morality, rationality, and order—cross-fertilized in SE. Often, this restoration requires that this good man give off glints of the same tarnishing evil that characterizes his foes—Glenn Ford's wronged cop in Fritz Lang's great noir *The Big Heat* (1953) must turn nearly as nasty as his enemies; Al Pacino eventually makes us wonder if he is himself the killer in *Cruising* (1980); even Zen-like but black-gloved Luke Skywalker—to cross generic boundaries—flirts with the Dark Side he means to eradicate in *Return of the Jedi* (1983). But SE suggests that Rick is *already* bad, already redolent of the same vice he will eventually combat. He is not a hero so much as he is a corrupt man capable of one heroic act. That he manages to save Julia yet loses everything in the end (being taken to trial for taking bribes, losing his wife in the process, and his mistress) affirms the film's ambivalence towards him. For much of the film, his odiousness, not to mention incompetence, leaves the audience wondering why we're forced to identify with him. (I believe it is precisely Rick's alienatingness that kept audiences away from and critics rancorous towards SE.) But then the film reverses its previously established take on Rick. It and Cage become quieter in their interpretation of Rick. By the end, he is almost pitiable—yet he is never ennobled by this distortion of his nasty vitality, or by his act of heroism. SE refuses to allow us a consistent, continuous regard for its protagonist, one of the least coherent or centered male figures in recent films. In a film that

strains to convince us of the rigged nature of what we “see”—reality, the order of things, established truths—Rick becomes a human graph for the instabilities within the social order as the film depicts it. Before *Memento* (2001), SE depicts a blurry, slugged antihero whose pursuit of the “truth” calls the idea of objective truth into question.

The heavyweight boxing match Rick goes to see seems like a gladiatorial match in the arena of the world, with Rick in a ring-side seat. The boxing match is a very apt metaphor. It prefigures the pummeling Rick will receive both literally and psychologically, and it visually encapsulates the theme of conflict, competition, rancor, and deadly violence between men. Amidst all the whirling, dizzying panoramic noise and color, we are introduced to Commander Kevin Dunne (Gary Sinise), a government official who is assigned to assure the protection of the Secretary of Defense. Dunne is Rick's “best friend,” a line that deepens, over the course of the film, in resonance. These men couldn't be more distinct: Dunne is as cool and clenched as Rick is loud and flamboyant. Rick wears a loud, hideous, tawdry ensemble of shiny brown jacket and gold-and-copper Hawaiian shirt (he looks like a goofy pimp), whereas Dunne dresses in a severe suit.

Complementing Rick and Dunne's contrasting styles of manhood, two important female figures appear, appositely distinct—a bespectacled blonde woman in an all-white suit, and a redhead with crimson tresses Pre-Raphaelite in their lush, loose abundance. Key to SE's obsessions with externality and false perceptions, both of these women are in costume. These two women will shed their costumed skins, revealing their real identities, but the first impressions they make are importantly memorable. Taken together, these women come to seem like an evolutionary model of womanhood, from essentialist sexual seductress to essentialist good woman. This point is key because, directly related to the depiction of male relations in De Palma, the use of tropes of iconic womanhood also dominates his work. I will return to this point and its relevance below.

Appropriate for a film whose tagline is, “Believe everything except your eyes,” the opening tracking shot becomes a document of seemingly established truth that the remainder of the film violently revises. What will be revealed is that the blonde in glasses is the brunette heroine, Julia Costello (Carla Gugino), in disguise. Her efforts to give the Secretary insider information on the faultiness of a new military defense system are cut short by a sniper's bullets, which rip fatally through the Secretary's body. These bullets then rip through her arm, and at that point Rick saves her for the first time, jumping on her and bringing her to the ground. Unbeknownst to Rick, Dunne has masterfully coordinated the assassination of the Secretary, having employed, among others, the redhead, who serves as a decoy. He has also bribed one of the heavyweights, Tyler, to lose the fight in order to catalyze the assassination. Having dispatched the sniper himself, Dunne will eliminate the cool, taut blonde who played the redhead and another of his minions, who played a hectoring, distracting drunk at the match (he yells tellingly, “Here comes the pain!”), leaving Julia as Dunne's major quarry.

The remainder of the film—since we quickly learn of Dunne's villainy—examines Rick's attempt to find and then protect Julia and his gradual recognition of Dunne's evil. Hence the primary

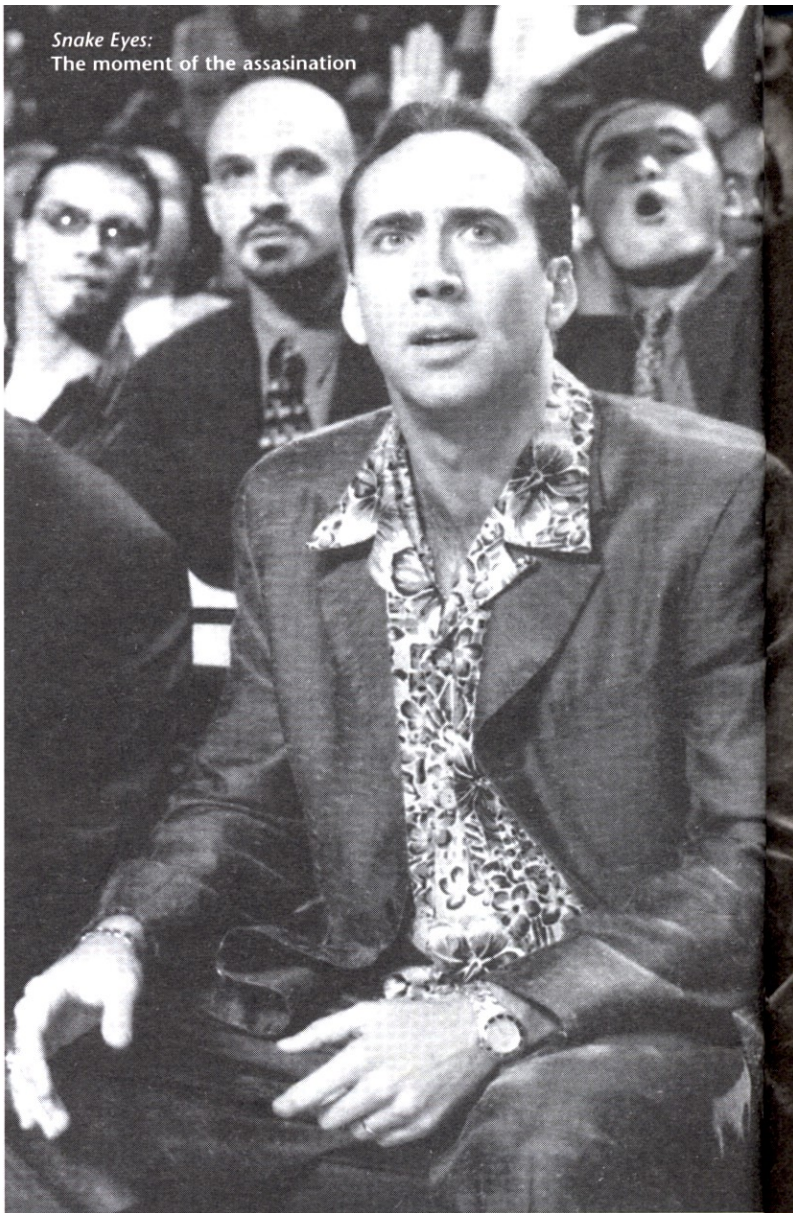


subject of the film. What will Rick honor—his loyalty to his friend or his sense, however fleeting, of duty?

In making Rick's grappling with his friend's evil its chief preoccupation, *SE* refuses the conventional trajectory of heterosexual romance that dominates Hollywood narrative, including even the less stable and more subversive genres of thrillers and noir. Remarkably, the more intimate Rick's relationship to Julia becomes, the more it is *de-eroticized*—there is barely any sexual *frisson* between them when Rick, having found Julia (in a typically spellbinding suspense sequence that seems perfunctory in comparison to the film's other concerns) before Dunne is able to get to her (and kill her), interrogates her and learns of her role in the plot. In this important scene, set in a stairwell where they *both* hide out from Dunne, Rick and Julia discuss what she knows about Dunne. The anguish on Rick's face communicates the difficulty he has in accepting Dunne's real identity—in fact, in a moment of frightening rage that connects Rick to Dunne in shared capacity for violence, Rick yells at Julia that she must be wrong about Dunne's complicity. Like a parent with a violent child, a battered wife trying to reason with her abusive husband, or, more strikingly, a hostage victim trying to appease a violent kidnapper, Julia painstakingly attempts to assure Rick that her view of the situation must be faulty. As opposed to, say, *Sisters* (1973), *Blow Out* (1981), or *Body Double* (1984), all of which feature an imperfect male hero who vows to protect a woman from another man's murderous threat, *SE* never builds the Rick-Julia relationship (not even in the deliberately limp coda in which they reunite, only to separate once again) as a passionate romance. *SE*'s chief emotional project is the depiction of the failed friendship between Rick and Dunne, not the healing promise of heterosexual romance.

*SE* creates a protagonist deprived of phallic authority and drive, a protagonist cut off from the power of the homosocial sphere and the mobilizing need to consummate heterosexual desire, both of which confirm the successful realization of American manhood in film, literature, and culture. In Rick, *SE* depicts American masculinity in a tizzy. (In its heroine, it continues the reformulation of this category of persona begun in *Raising Cain* and continued in *Mission to Mars*.<sup>1</sup>) There is no more graphic depiction of the incoherent, unstable condition of American manhood than Rick's disoriented, stumbling journey back to Julia after Tyler, at Dunne's behest, has beaten him. Julia becomes a pawn in the battle of wills between these men—and also a conduit for their intimacy. As queer theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (drawing on René Girard's work in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*) have argued, triangulated desire—two male rivals battling over the contested site of Woman—both occludes the specificity of conflicts between men and renders women the means of exchange between them. In this fashion, all the competing desires between men—including, but certainly not limited to, or necessarily dependent on, homosexuality—are processed through their battle over a woman. In De Palma, woman facilitates the often murderous relations between men.<sup>2</sup> Protecting Julia (whom Rick evinces little specific interest in) becomes a way for Rick to sustain his friendship with Dunne. Seemingly staggering towards Julia's defense, attempting to prevent Dunne from killing her, Rick is rushing to protect Dunne

*Snake Eyes:*  
The moment of the assassination



from his own murderous passions. This sequence emblemizes what Sedgwick describes as the "radically disrupted continuum, in our society, between sexual and nonsexual male bonds" (23). Throughout the film, Rick and Dunne's relationship is depicted as one of increasingly torturous intimacy, even at the end—an intimacy precariously positioned within that productively and agonizingly liminal space between the sexual and the nonsexual.<sup>3</sup> When Rick, completely believing in Dunne's innocence at this point, aggressively tries to convince Dunne to let Rick shield him from media and police spotlight in the wake of the Secretary's murder, the low angles and physical proximity between the men suggest a clandestine rendezvous. When the men reconvene in a strangely futuristic boardroom (whose swirling orange sky-background mural alternately suggests crepuscular loss or apocalyptic finitude), and Dunne deceives Rick with a duplicitous tale about his distracting exchange with the redhead (De Palma provides an appositely mendacious flashback), Rick assures him both that he's human because he "got a boner" and that he is Dunne's best friend. This exchange is interesting because it involves Rick in a phantasmatic indulgence in Dunne's phallic potency *while* he affirms the closeness of their tie—and the fake flashback, with the redhead seemingly enticing Dunne with sexual provocations,





becomes a kind of weirdly queer shared fantasy between the men of the rapturous possibilities of acquiescing to illicit heterosexual abandon. (Throughout their conversation in the opening, Rick and Dunne establish that while Dunne maintains a ramrod monogamy to his wife, Rick casually sleeps around, plotting trysts even as he commands his wife, on the cell phone, to order deluxe pizzas. Rick's lack of interest in Julia can't be explained away by his being a married man.) When Rick sees for himself the evidence of Dunne's guilt, he repeats the line, "You're my best friend," this time with a heartbroken recognition. The pistol that Dunne then drives against Rick's chest comes to seem not so much a threat of violence but the violently explicit manifestation of the (potential) nature of the threatening intimacy between them. Dunne's fatal flaw—from within the debased logic of his character—becomes his inability to kill Rick in this scene, in the scene where he commands Tyler to beat Rick, and even at the end when he finally, by having followed Rick, finds Julia, needing only to dispatch Rick in order to dispatch her. No other De Palma film has ever made the betrayal of male friendship so pervasively its subject—and, perhaps because of this intense focus, no other time is friendship between men so treated as thwarted romance. The economy of ruined love between men in a homo-

phobic, annihilating culture, the blood bleeding Rick spits at the medals of honor on Dunne's lapel becomes a coded exchange of bodily fluids between them—the climactic outpouring of their doomed romance and an affront against institutionalized male power (blood on medals).

SE thereby drives at the heart—the dictating logic—of other De Palma films, establishing the betrayal of one man by his friend as their chief, obsessive subject. Failed male friendship—caused by betrayal, imperfect acquiescence to complicity with the collective power of fraternity, and other factors—metonymically serves as the linchpin of De Palma's consistent, overarching critique of dominant forms of social control: governments, bureaucracies, special task forces, the military, the media, all depicted as spheres of homosocial power. In this manner, De Palma critiques the figuration of the homosocial as the special enclave of patriarchal power in our culture. As Sedgwick writes,

In any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence (25).



The sphere of homosocial power is always figured as an inescapable web (hence its structural congruence) of corruption that destroys the protagonist (when Rick indisputably learns the truth about Dunne, Dunne's legs on a stairwell, like a black spider, approach Rick first). In his early film *Greetings* (1968), a Godardian comedy, a group of friends helps one of their own to dodge the draft—thereby pitting themselves against the entire might of Vietnam War-era militaristic American male power. But increasingly, this male estrangement from male power is figured in the efforts of a single man to thwart male domination—of which theme SE is the culmination.<sup>4</sup> Herein lies the radicalism of De Palma's work—he demonstrates that even heterosexual men, the protagonists in the narrative of normalized culture, can be at an anguished remove from the realm of concentrated patriarchal power embodied by the homosocial.

This last point is crucial to SE. Although so many critics and theorists accuse De Palma of plagiarizing the work of other directors and of misogynistically brutalizing his female characters, I would like to treat SE both as a refinement of themes of specific interest in relation to De Palma's *own* work and as a progressive stage in the evolution of his depiction of women.<sup>5</sup> By fusing the political thriller with the Hitchcockian suspense film, De Palma enmeshes the corrupt machinations of political power with the narrative logic of suspense, using suspense as a mean of exploring the urgency of individual needs within the gears of a crushingly indifferent network of political intrigue.

As Pascal Bonitzer puts it,

Suspense is a kind of perversion, a form of sickness affecting not only cinematographic duration (with its compression and dilation), but also objects and modes of behavior (153).

Bonitzer writes in relation to *Notorious*, but the same theory applies (perhaps even more so) to De Palma's oeuvre. For De Palma, suspense, while always an opportunity for art-making, those feats of cutting and cunning that reformulate critical film theories from Eisenstein to Hitchcock to Welles to Kubrick, allowing De Palma to reinvent his own forms perpetually, as if each suspense sequence brings him closer and closer to some indefinable formal height, primarily allows him to mobilize the tensions at work in a culture that promotes violence, intolerance, and corruption while annihilating, especially, those individuals in the almost always already hopeless position of critiquing and even battling this culture.

SE's obsession with technological apparatuses and fluctuating manifestations of womanhood and femininity make full use of this hybridized suspense and political thriller form. De Palma uses both as a means of extending suspense technique *and* making political statements. Both of these tropes—the technology of surveillance and the iconic use of women—muddy the waters of established “truths” about power, gender, and sexuality, by being deployed or behaving in unexpected ways.

The vast array of surveillance gadgets—panels with blinking, dilating rows of screens, screens that can zero in on and seize their prey, a hovering blimp-camera (the Zero Gravity Eye), a lone, ever-recording camera that functions like a sci-fi vestige of an ancient, vanished culture—closes in on the characters, trap-

ping them. The screens figure in the bravura suspense sequence when Dunne and Rick both use them to find Julia. They also lend themselves to a political commentary about the uses of surveillance. The actions of the surveillance cameras, seeming manifestations of the Foucauldian Panopticon, that ever-surveilling mechanism of Power, are not uniformly ascribable to *one* political regime—they do not (simplistically) signify Foucauldian Power so much as they suggest the multiplying sources and means of an increasingly more public culture. While Dunne employs them to capture and kill, Rick also employs them (using that Zero Gravity Eye, Emerson's roving Eyeball as an Orwellian monitor) to expose Dunne's culpability. Surveillance has multifarious uses here.

The uses of female glamour and sexuality in De Palma are much more complex and thematically layered than they are often given credit for. The two cartoonish versions of womanhood that we see at the fight—the blonde in glasses wearing creamy white, the woman in flaming red hair and lava-red dress—suggest (in ways that both challenge and reinforce Freudian paradigms) that sexuality can both disrupt and enforce aggression. The ripe sexuality of the two competing forms of exaggerated womanhood—Julia and the blonde agent in costume—are in juxtaposed relation to the masculine order of both the fight and the assassination plot. Julia uses her sexuality—or rather, a consciously distorted version of it—to gain access to the Senator (useless to him, but not to Rick); Dunne uses the redhead-blond to distract Rick and deflect attention from his murderous plot, using Woman strategically as a predictably disruptive force against the homosocial sphere he both manipulates and relies upon. In this manner, we see both women *and* men deploying femininity to disrupt or manipulate patriarchal power, just as we see that patriarchy always stamps out, or tries to, feminine agency. To put this another way, both Julia (with her high-priced call girl ensemble) and Dunne (who, like *Vertigo's* Gavin Elster, has presumably created the redhead from wig to dress as an alluring distraction to men) rely on graphically sexist female types, but each with radically different purposes and ends. Tellingly named after the biblical temptress, the hurricane “Jezebel,” which disrupts Dunne's plot to kill Julia, suggests the revenge of calumniated womanhood on the misogynistic power of murdering men.<sup>6</sup>

SE synthesizes the work of many De Palma films. It meshes the terrifying political despair of *Blow Out* and *The Fury* (as much a political film as it is a genre/horror entry) with the sensuality and obsession with voyeurism of *Dressed to Kill* and *Body Double*. SE is poised rather excruciatingly between the all-out despair of *Casualties of War* and the tentative (as opposed to *Mission to Mars's* exultant) hopefulness of *Body Double* (which tentatively suggests that Jake has been freed of his sundry traps). Yet SE has a tone, as well, all its own—it ends with a cynical plangency that almost suggests a resignation in the director. The final image of the end credits synthesizes the themes of SE, provides a thesis statement. The glimmering red ring, sparkling with corruption, of the murdered redhead-blond, in the pillar that will support a new—and, presumably, no less evil—male Atlantic City world (the gendered nature of which is concretized by the almost frieze-like cluster of male construction workers), suggests a horrified



but curiously blank recognition of the arduousness—if not impossibility—of challenging the rigged nature of politics as usual. Progress ineluctably builds on corruption; men always erect pillars on the bodies of murdered women.

I want to thank my wonderful, supremely intelligent, and helpful friends at Bill Fentum's Brian De Palma discussion site (<http://www.briandepalma.net>).

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1 Julia Costello may be used as a pawn, but she does not act like one. She risks her life passing information to the Senator; she heroically eludes both Dunne and Rick; and, even in her trapped cell, where Rick has placed her for her safety (a notion which she mocks), she hardly acts like the passive victim but actively attempts to escape—important because it shows her desire to escape both Dunne and Rick. While De Palma's films have always had great heroines, there is a lull in the strong capable one from *Blow Out* to the early 90s films. Yet in the 90s, she has returned. The heroines of *Raising Cain*, *SE*, and *Mission to Mars* are all gutsy, savvy, determined women who fight against their seemingly inescapable fates (death, for one). In *Raising Cain*, Lolita Davidovich's character emerges triumphant, if muddled, from the same swampy fate that dragged down Marion Crane (and her car and the \$40,000) in Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The much maligned but often beautiful and moving *Mission to Mars* features, in Connie Nielsen's astronaut, one of De Palma's most forthright heroines. She boldly attempts to rescue her husband (Tim Robbins) from death in space, in one of the most harrowing sequences in any recent film. This moment is also extremely important because it transfers the burden of failed heroism, so crucial to De Palma's work, from men to women—a mixed blessing perhaps, but crucial as an indication of De Palma's development as a strong director of strong, vital women.

2 *Body Double* anticipates *SE*'s staging of triangulated desire. In this film, the killer hires a porn star, Holly Body (memorably played by Melanie Griffith), to perform nightly erotic dances for the titillation of the claustrophobic actor Jake (Craig Wasson), whom the killer embroils in a murder plot to kill his wife. Unbeknownst to Jake, the killer is his friend, Sam. Sam, like Dunne, is initially depicted as the protagonist's only "real" friend, but this friendship is only a ruse to ensnare Jake in the killer's plot. The film's inverts its own graphic exploitation of woman as the object of a male's scopophilic gaze by revealing Holly Body's sexual performance as the centerpiece of the killer's plot. In this way, heterosexual relations are subsumed by the larger, consuming narrative of male rivalry. And there is no more homoerotic moment in De Palma than the scene in which Sam tempts Jake to view Holly Body (whom Jake believes is the endangered woman, Gloria Revelle) through a telescope; with a master sadist's precision, Sam leeringly elicits Jake's sexual responses to the woman whose orgasmic dance he views. *Body Double*, like *SE*, figures male friendship—shared power between men predicated on the exploitation of women—as a hollow construct, reliant on duplicity and betrayal, preventing any form of desire, heterosexual or homosexual, from achieving realization. But *SE* goes further and deeper than *Body Double* in suggestively figuring the doomed male friendship as a doomed romance.

3 Whether "sexual or nonsexual," thwarted or unrealized, the love between Rick and Dunne provides a new level of emotional intensity in the depiction of male friendship and its ineluctable betrayal in De Palma. And, rather troublingly, the surrounding chaos of the hurricane and the flood it triggers (cut from the final film), suggests that this Atlantic City Millenium Theater (as it is called), is a Gomorrah that needs cleansing. In the end-credits sequence, a bunch of male construction workers—suggesting nothing less than the exposition of a gay porno—rebuilds the Theater, wielding a huge phallic pillar which Samson might have clenched. The final shot of the film is the sparkling red ring, buried in the pillar, of the Delilah-like redhead, whom Dunne has murdered. Building on buried truths about corruption and death, this new paradise pivots around a nearly orgasmic conventicle of men who toil above the buried secrets of dead women. In this way, De Palma suggests the erotic potentiality of the homosocial but also its exclusionary ambivalence towards the fate and inclusion of women. More importantly, though, De Palma suggests the perpetual rebuilding of culture on the buried remains of its own corrupt history.

4 In order to understand both the crucial relevance of this theme to his work and its foregrounding in *SE*, it is useful to consider briefly similar depictions of a pro-

tagonist's alienation from male power, betrayal by a male friend or male group, and the almost uncanny power of the male homosocial sphere in De Palma's films. In film after film, De Palma treats relations between men as opportunities for betrayal. In *Sisters* (1973), male rivalry over the contested figure of a woman leads to the murder of both men by the same woman; in *Obsession* (1976), the protagonist's male friend and business partner tricks and cheats him; in *The Fury* (1978), two veteran government agents war over the psychokinetically gifted son of one of the agents, leading to the deaths of all three—though the two agents are initially presented as old friends, one agent betrays the other, whose son has the power the government wants to harness as an espionage tool; the heroine of the film dispatches the villain in a bravura montage-sequence finale; in *Dressed to Kill* (1980), a conflict between a psychiatrist and a cross-dressing patient of his turns out to be the madness of one, when it is revealed that the psychiatrist has a dual personality (he betrays himself); in *Blow Out* (1981), the hero, a movie sound man trying to expose an assassination plot, reaches out to a reporter and thereby insures the murder of a woman whom he is trying to protect—the hero's efforts to expose nefarious government secrets are counterbalanced by the hired assassin's to bury them; in *Body Double* (1984), the hero is tricked into being an accomplice to a murder by the murderer himself, who has pretended to be the hero's friend and advocate; in *Casualties of War* (1989), a Vietnam war film based on a true story (and the nightmarish fulfillment of themes of national manhood first developed in *Greetings*), one young man must oppose an entire subset of the homosocial sphere over the contested site of a woman. A group of soldiers kidnap a young Vietnamese woman and brutally rape and beat her. The hero refuses to participate and attempts to free the woman. Not only are his heroic attempts utterly unsuccessful, but he also becomes the target of a murderous plot by the other soldiers. In *Raising Cain* (1992), the protagonist is betrayed by his own father, a psychoanalyst who has performed grisly psychological tests on him since childhood. Like *Dressed to Kill*, *Raising Cain* translates the murderous conflict between the individual male and the homosocial sphere into a psychomachia. De Palma's 1996 movie version of the 1960s TV show *Mission: Impossible* angered many fans of the original program by having the avuncular Jim Phelps betray his loyal underling Ethan Hunt—a twist entirely consistent, however, with the theme of male relations as a realm of cruelty and betrayal in De Palma's work, as these films evince consistently and constantly.

5 By emphasizing De Palma's ownership of his own themes, I not only acknowledge but openly state that these themes refract those in the work of the artist whose preoccupations most saturate De Palma's own, Hitchcock. Rather than merely ripping off "the most superficial aspects of Hitchcock's work," De Palma deepens and sustains some of the crucial obsessions of his predecessor in the realm of suspense. I am in no way suggesting that I consider De Palma a greater or more sophisticated talent than Hitchcock—rather, I am saying that De Palma continues Hitchcock's cultural work, exploring the limits and implications of the burdensome obligations of maintaining a coherent, gendered identity in a splintered, fractured world.

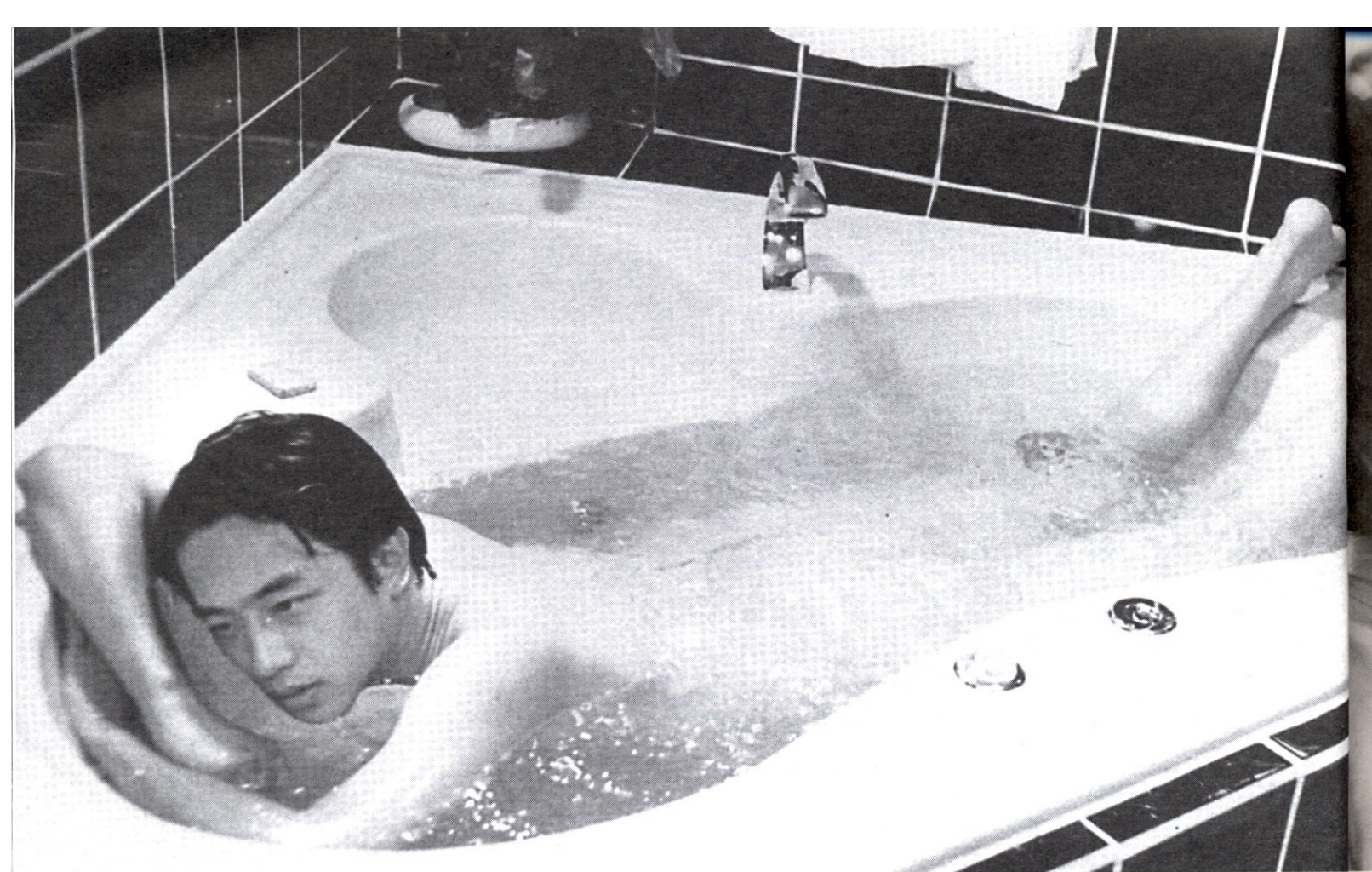
The diabolical nature of male relations in films like *Notorious*, *Strangers on a Train*, *Dial M for Murder*, *Vertigo*, and *Frenzy* imprints De Palma's work with a single-minded interest in exposing the repetition-compulsion of male violence within our male-dominated culture. The torturing of women (recalling Hitchcock's recipe for suspense) becomes in De Palma's films the product of male rivalry. It is precisely by building upon Hitchcockian themes while adding his own interest in corrupt (male) politics that De Palma finds a unique way of interrogating culture.

6 I am astonished by the insensitive commentary given on this subject by Jonathan Rosenbaum in his review of *Snake Eyes*. He writes of De Palma's depiction of Julia that she is

framed more like a sex toy than a human being: she enters the movie ass first, and her breasts are invariably shot from various angles like cantilevered balconies. Especially characteristic of De Palma is the courtly decision to turn her into a would-be hooker, as she approaches a creepy hotel guest hoping to find a safe haven; if she's not quite as pliant as a Playboy bunny, it isn't for lack of intention on De Palma's part.

Actually, intentionality is key to De Palma's uses and treatment of women, especially in *SE*. Smart, sensitive Julia deploys exaggerated types of femininity specifically to entice, seduce, and discombobulate men. Through her vacillating manifestations as whore and good girl, Julia suggests the impossibility of sustaining one mode of femininity in a misogynistic culture. (To demonstrate that in this regard she is organically linked to other De Palma heroines, amidst the pandemonium in the arena there is a shot of Julia in her blond wig, after she and the Senator have been shot, reaching out in bloody, blind fashion to the audience. This shot almost exactly replicates one of blonde, bloodied Kate Miller's similar actions in the elevator murder scene of *Dressed to Kill*.) Rather she ingeniously dons and discards essentialist female identities as a means of negotiating and navigating her way through this corrupt male Atlantic City world. The redhead becomes an almost androidlike (programmed by Dunne) double for Julia, in that she is a male-power-created version of a strategically deployed femininity that manipulates, for different purposes, the homosocial. Through Julia and the fake redhead both, De Palma suggests that archetypal, iconic versions of womanhood and femininity are drag costumes that can be assumed at will for multifarious purposes and designs by any sexed, gendered person. In this way, the surveillance technology and these tropes of femininity lend themselves to various, contrapuntal, destabilizingly ambiguous uses.





## FLOWING DESIRE, FLOATING SOULS

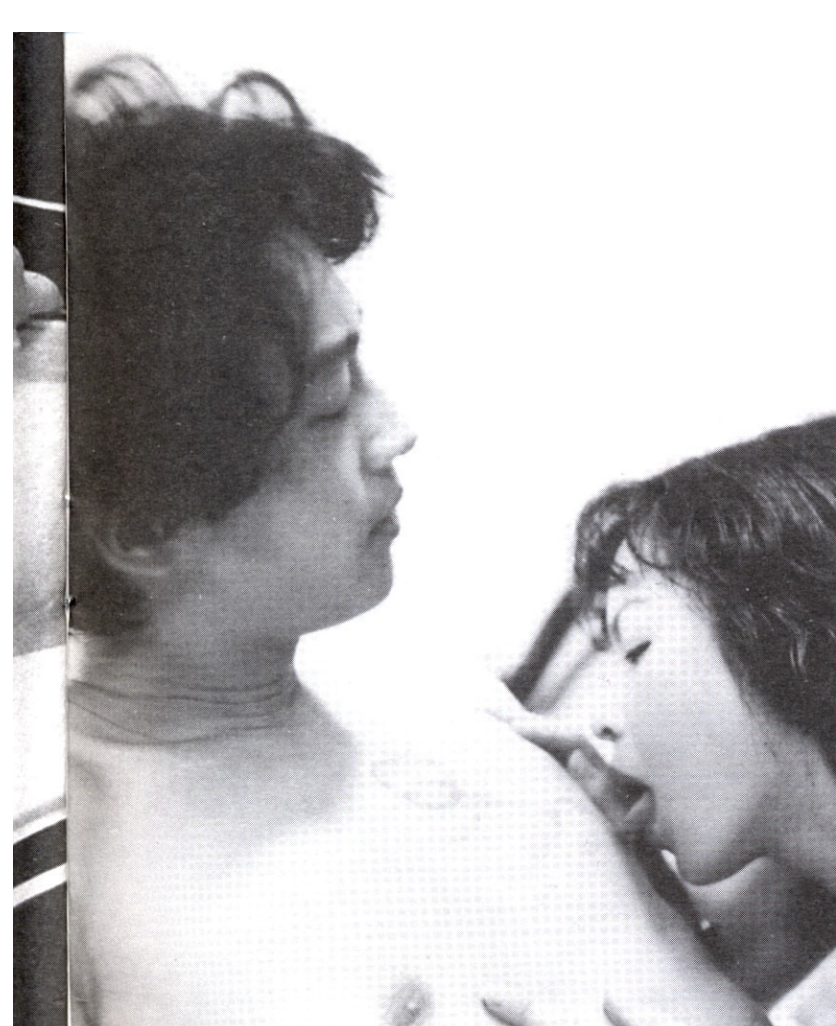
### Modern Cultural Landscape in Tsai Ming-Liang's Taipei Trilogy

by I-Fen Wu

Emerging in the early 1980s, Taiwanese New Cinema has developed its style as a reflection of Taiwan's history and society, representing the country's colonial past, social transformation, and contemporary cultural development. Consistently projecting history onto the screen, New Cinema creates a journey through Taiwan's past from the colonial era to the present, attempting to represent history in ways which will lead to the exploration and reconsideration of Taiwan's national and cultural identities. With the materials that sustain the national past, the New Cinema of the 1980s presents the very fabric of a national community, perpetuating the idea of the nation itself, the meaning of its culture, and the transformation of its society.

But the New Cinema of the 1990s has developed a different tendency, which is largely concerned with present-day capitalist metropolitan culture that no longer bears traces of the country's past. Even the New Cinema directors of the 1980s, such as Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang, who were keen to trace Taiwan's history through filmic representation, have gradually moved their concern with historical representation to the focus on urban metropolitan culture since the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> The urbanisation of Taiwan provides a dimension for filmmakers to explore modern society, and simultaneously draws a dividing line between the 1980s and 1990s New Cinema productions. Most directors of the 1990s no longer examine history with nostalgia; they seem to be more concerned with the outcome of that history, the urban environment of highly capitalist development, to show their interest in contemporary urban culture, and to turn their camera to the fast-growing Taipei. It is perhaps because the new genera-





*Vive, L'Amour:*

LEFT: Hsiao-Kang (who is always played by Lee Kang-Sheng, Tsai's resident icon) meditates suicide.

RIGHT: Ah-Jung and Lin

tion directors have not experienced the transforming era of Taiwan's society, or because the tight budget for contemporary film productions makes it financially expedient to locate narratives in and near the city, that Taipei is thereby frequently foregrounded in 1990s New Cinema to present the impulse of contemporary urban culture.<sup>2</sup> Viewed as a stage for the social change from the traditional to the modernised, Taipei figures in 1980s New Cinema in order to deal with the dichotomies of city/country, urban/ traditional, examining the process of historical and socio-political shifts, whereas in 1990s New Cinema, Taipei comes to be seen as an urban jungle of infinite possibilities, a stage for a reformulation of the cultural landscape and moral values, and such a portrait of Taipei often appears in Tsai Ming-Liang's films.

In contrast with his predecessors' consistent inclinations towards history, Tsai Ming-Liang does not bother trying to understand the process of modernisation and social-economic transformation; instead, he is inspired by the changes in socio-cultural patterns as a result of urbanisation, by which to explore the plenitude of modern culture. As one of the most distinctive filmmakers in contemporary Taiwan, Tsai is remarkably adept at exploring current culture, and his films consistently and obsessively deal with the urban alienation of a society in which people are emotionally blocked and seemingly afloat in a state of loss. *Rebels of the Neon God*/*Qing Shaonian Nezha* (1992), *Vive, L'amour* /*Aiqing Wansui* (1994), and *The River* /*Heliu* (1997), which are linked by a stylistic mood of isolation and thematic motifs such as the disaffected connections between people, form an interconnected trilogy that provides

the explicit and detailed impulses through which to explore a contemporary society that has bulldozed its past and jerry-built its future.

Tsai's vision of contemporary culture is elaborated through his portrait of Taipei City, which comes into focus as an implicit protagonist of all his films. In other words, his metropolitan Taipei provides the setting to reflect upon the sound and look of a city and the lives of its people, projecting a cultural model embodied by western capitalist ideology that challenges traditional cultural values by tearing down and rebuilding the moral institutions and disciplines of social orders: the family, the school, and sexual relations. Tsai's foregrounding of mise-en-scène of the capital Taipei as a reflection of urban sprawl is built around a rejection of traditional social values, through which the reformulation of modern cultural patterns is emphasised. Taipei becomes cinematically as well as socially the site of a new cultural generation, the locus of a defiant youth culture that rejects traditions, where the socio-cultural landscape depicted in 1980s New Cinema is, in a quite different filmic narrative, replaced.

Tsai's Taipei is a world of urban malaise, in which people are cut off from each other and from their feelings, moving around drab, underlit apartments, cheap hotels, and gay saunas, looking for comforts to satisfy their loneliness and isolation. In *Rebels of the Neon God*, Hsiao-Kang, living with his parents in an apartment but having a strained relationship with his father, is supposed to be cramming for his university entrance exams; Ah-Tze, a young chancer, makes his living by prying open the coin-boxes of pay-phones and stealing the

1 The insistent nostalgia charactering Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films seems to be disappearing in his recent ones. After *Good Men, Good Women* (1994), Hou no longer looked for the lost moments of Taiwan's historical plenitude, but sought to figure out a meaningful way to deal with contemporary life, which is obviously seen in *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1996) and *Millennium Mambo* (2001). Although he dealt with modern society in *Daughter of the Nile* (1987), we do not know if he attempted to find out the meaning of modern people's lives when he shot this film, as the film's producer insisted that Hou had to use the cast and story attractive to young audiences. Edward Yang has already started to explore the terrain of urban culture in his *Terrorizer* (1986), yet his early films, such as *That Day, On the Beach* (1982), and *Taipei Story* (1985), are concerned with Taiwan's socio-economic restructuring from an industrialised to a capitalist society. His sharp observation on the apparent cultural incompatibility between tradition and modernisation, the past and the present, has been completely replaced by his exploration of the bourgeoisie in an ultra-urban society in which people are trapped in a cage of materialism, unable to find room for a plausible, personal intimacy. This has been a consistent theme in his later films, *A Confucian Confusion* (1994), *Mahjong* (1996), and *Yi Yi* (2000).

2 According to the Taiwanese film critic, Wang Wei, there is a subtle reason for the use of Taipei as the shooting locale in the 1990s New Cinema. Long dominated by Hollywood and Hong Kong films in the box offices, Taiwan's film industry has declined at home as in the rest of the world. This results in emerging problems like the shortage of professional workers, and the lack of confidence in production investment. Big budget productions in the 1990s like *Good Men, Good Women*, and *The Hills of No Return*, which each cost 30-50 million Taiwanese Dollars (about £0.6-1 million) are rarely seen. Wang Wei, "Taipei Transformation: Taiwanese Cinema from the 80s to the 90s", *Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival* (1995), 63.



motherboards of video games with his friend; and Ah-Kuei, the mistress of Ah-Tze's brother, works as a receptionist at an indoor ice skating in the West End. One day, the three of them coincidentally meet when Ah-Tze gives Ah-Kuei a lift to the West End; his motorcycle blocks the way of a taxi at a set of traffic lights, and the taxi driver sounds his horn. The driver is Hsiao-Kang's father, who is taking Hsiao-Kang to a cinema for a break from his studies. Annoyed by the sharp beeping, Ah-Tze takes out the lock of his motorcycle to break the taxi's front mirror, and then immediately speeds away before Hsiao-Kang's father can respond.

Hsiao-Kang drops out of cram school and hangs around on the streets of the West End; Ah-Tze is drawn to Ah-Kuei and sometimes visits her. Seeing Ah-Tze and Ah-Kuei together at a fun fair, Hsiao-Kang recognises him as the person who damaged his father's car; he begins to follow him. He catches a chance to wreck Ah-Tze's motorcycle by puncturing the tyres, slashing the seat and gluing the ignition while Ah-Tze is having sex with Ah-Kuei in a hotel. In the next morning, Ah-Tze is furious to discover what has happened to his motorcycle, and later, in a disastrous foray, sells the stolen video-game motherboards to the gangsters from whom he stole them. Ah-Tze and his friend are violently attacked by the gangsters, but eventually manage to jump into a taxi, the driver of which is Hsiao-Kang's father. Ah-Kuei and Ah-Tze want to leave Taipei for another place, but do not know where to go and what to do; Hsiao-Kang goes to a telephone meeting centre, and sits there feeling frustrated, with no idea how to carry on his life.

*Rebels of the Neon God* is constructed around a present-day youth who are lost in their sterile preoccupations, foregrounding the urban mise-en-scène of Taipei as a narrative strategy to address their feelings of inadequacy and frustration. Tsai's focus upon modern people's emotional emptiness and lack of communication is inscribed in the urban milieu, such as the flooded apartment, the murky hotel room, the noisy fun fair, and the under-construction tube stations; the city spectacle articulates the desires and emotions of modern people, which have been blocked and offered no spiritual escape routes. But this sense of emptiness seems to be pushed deeper and further in Tsai's next feature, *Vive, L'amour*, in which the three characters have a ménage à trois when each of them fetches up in a luxury unlet flat that is up for sale.

Lin, a young unmarried estate agent, is actually the one trying to sell the flat, and she occasionally uses it to have sex. Ah-Jung, who makes his living by selling clothes, which he has bought in from abroad, on the night streets of the East District, follows Lin back to the flat one night, and begins a relationship with her. The other young man, Hsiao-Kang, who sells urn-spaces in a columbarium, finds this flat as he looks for a place to commit suicide. That evening, Ah-Jung's arrival in the flat forestalls Hsiao-Kang's suicide; the two of them make acquaintance and have no compunction about using it for a temporary shelter. Hsiao-Kang becomes conscious of the relationship between Ah-Jung and Lin, and sometimes hides himself under their bed to experience the moment of orgasm. One day, waking up from this great sexual pleasure, Lin dresses up and gets out of the flat, leaving Ah-Jung sleeping on the bed.

Hsiao-Kang moves out from under the bed, noiselessly approaching Ah-Jung to kiss him, and then lies down beside him. Lin walks into a park, and sits on a bench, where she cannot help bursting into tears.

There is hardly any dialogue in *Vive, L'amour*, since the three non-connecting characters rarely meet and sometimes hide from each other, seemingly unaware of each other's existence. By cross-cutting three unrelated characters and withholding background information, Tsai leaves a lot of space for the viewer to interpret their relationships, and simply trusts his characters to move the viewer without dramatised conversation and emotional background music. On the other hand, Tsai also drops a lot of hints in the space he leaves, for example, the composition of the city spectacle and the sexual discourse, which underscore the messages to project a society embodied as much by urban alienation as by material desires, producing an existential solitude that has become a part of the urban cultural landscape. It seems that Tsai's films are all about solitude and alienation, about modern people who are unwilling to form emotional connections with friends and family. Sharing the characters, the mood, and the storyline, the last part of Tsai's trilogy, *The River*, elaborates the theme of emotional detachment from life even further, portraying the obscure despair of modern people, who are fervently looking for something while not knowing what that something is.

The unemployed young man, Hsiao-Kang, comes across his ex-classmate, Hsiang-Chi, who now works for a film unit shooting scenes near Tamshui River in central Taipei, which is notorious for its polluted water. On her invitation, Hsiao-Kang follows her to the film set and is cajoled by the film director to appear in her film as a corpse floating down the river. Afterwards, sent to a hotel to clean up, Hsiao-Kang has sex with Hsiang-Chi, but does not become involved with her, even though she seems to like him and wishes to carry on their relationship. Next day, Hsiao-Kang develops a pain in his neck and shoulder that affects his life to the extent of making him suicidal while in the hospital. His parents, who do not talk to each other, take it in turns to try different cures, but none of them work. Meanwhile, the father's bedroom has water pouring through the ceiling from the unoccupied apartment upstairs. Rather than trying to stop it, he deflects the water out of the window by pipes and plastic sheets.

The father takes Hsiao-Kang to try a faith cure in Taichung, while the mother stays at home and discovers the streaming water from the apartment above. While they wait for the faith-healer's further instruction, the father hangs around a gay sauna where he unwittingly coincides with Hsiao-Kang, the latter having sneaked out of their hotel to relieve his stress. The father slaps Hsiao-Kang's face with a furious cry. The next morning, the faith-healer tells them to return to Taipei to consult a doctor. Having heard that the faith-healer cannot help, Hsiao-Kang sneaks out on to the balcony, not knowing what to do.

Offering no solution to Hsiao-Kang's pain at the end of the film, Tsai opens up the possibilities in the last scene in which Hsiao-Kang walks out on to the balcony, which could be either a suggestion of a suicide attempt, or a ray of hope that he could



be about to come to terms with his problems. The open ending of *The River* actually brings us back to the question of the urban cultural landscape of contemporary Taipei, which is addressed within the narrative and visual structure of the trilogy, and implicitly mobilised into the expression of sexual desires. It is clear that Tsai's filmic narrative in the trilogy shapes a new identity of urban culture, which embodies the shifting value system that has transformed the cultural fabric of Taiwanese society. A broader cultural discourse is provided through Tsai's foregrounding of Taipei City, which imparts a sexual connotation to modern people's relationships, and leads to an exploration of the modern cultural spectacle. Therefore, a close look at Taipei as the site of the breakdown of traditional social orders, and of the collapse of conservative categories of sexual identity in modern society, would serve well as a framework through which to examine Tsai's trilogy.

The emblematic significance of city spaces in Tsai's trilogy lies in its immediate ability to reflect social change, and the differences exposed by the cultural shift. Buildings, along with a few landmarks of Taipei, are among the most distinctive features in Tsai's composition of city spaces, embodying the history of the city and recording the changes in cultural patterns. In *Rebels of the Neon God*, Tsai's camera focuses upon the West End of Taipei, to present a city culture coherent with a defiant youth culture, which embraces sheer materialism and hedonistic desires, and turns itself against the social and moral codes to constitute a new Taiwanese-ness.<sup>3</sup> Visually, *Rebels of the Neon God* creates a younger cultural generation by giving pictorial prominence to the very localist vision of the West End, marked by the continuing narrative device of situating actions at specific places belonging to the present-day youth, which defines Taipei as the embodiment of generational self-affirmation and constructs it as the site of liberation from traditional social and sexual disciplines. The new cultural generation is expressed through the cinematic representation of Taipei in progressively sensuous images, foregrounding the unattractiveness of Taipei, which shows, in fact, the director's intention to capture the external ugliness that coincides with the internal tawdriness and uncertainty of the younger generation's world.

*Rebels of the Neon God* opens with an accident: Hsiao-Kang cuts his hand by breaking a window glass and rushes to the bathroom to clean up. Annoyed, Hsiao-Kang ignores his parents' concern over his hand, and indifferently goes back to his room. The first few scenes clearly depict the edgy relationship between the two generations, as the family live together in the small apartment but barely talk to each other. Tsai frequently emphasises the tension and alienated relationships between people through his framing of characters in apartments, showing no substantial understanding between family members, nor intimacy between friends and lovers, apparently assuming that every building in this high-capitalist development city is emotionally empty. In Tsai's world, the relationship between people is likely to be based on buying and selling, enabling people to repeatedly cross paths but come no closer together. In the early scene in which Ah-Kuei makes love with Ah-Tze's brother, neither talks to the other until the man's beeper sounds. The man leaves the bed and gets dressed. Before he

goes, he leaves a business card on Ah-Kuei's pillow, asking her to bring friends to buy cars from him. Ah-Kuei says nothing but puts his card into her bag. Here, the link between sex and love is ironic, because it is rather more mercenary than sincere. When the man leaves his business card on the bed, it is as if sex is a part of his business, included in his customer service. This car dealer views Ah-Kuei from a commercial perspective, labelling her as merchandise and evaluating the profit that could be made through her. Tsai has us see Ah-Kuei in a consumerist relation, watching her walking along the streets of the West End, shopping in a mall in which she sees and buys an image of herself through the dressing mirror in a fashion shop. In front of the mirror, she is presented as a commodity, an object of consumerism, the consumer to be consumed; and her material desire offers it back to her for the price of the product. It seems that consumerism has become the dynamic of a capitalist society in which everybody buys and sells, consumes and is consumed, chooses and is chosen. When Ah-Tze does not show up for their date, Ah-Kuei calls to a stranger to make another date out of spite, asking the man's name and age, and is herself asked the same questions. We see her in a consumerist situation, bargaining a relationship in a completely business-like manner, as if negotiating the price of a product.

Ah-Kuei is not the only one who knows that contemporary society is dominated by buy-and-sell relationships; the estate agent, Lin, in *Vive, L'amour*, knows this even better. She understands that each person is a consummate consumer, impetuously pursuing material possessions and disposing of relationships, only showing interest in what he can get from the others. She recognises the importance of buy-and-sell relationships, as a set of rules by which to survive in a capitalist society. Perhaps that is why she does not bother to talk much, except when she is trying to persuade her clients to buy the flats she recommends, when she talks with enthusiasm. Throughout the film, Lin is abnormally quiet and indifferent; far from feeling excited or disgusted about her life, she simply moves around the empty flats and apartments she sells. Lin's emotional state is as empty as those houses, which is explicitly suggested by her job as an estate agent, and by the film's mise-en-scène. Most of the scenes of *Vive, L'amour* are shot in the empty apartments which are for sale, where Lin is seen to eat, to talk to her clients, to take a nap, and to have sex. For Lin, all the houses are the same, and it makes no difference to her whether she goes home or not, as she only sleeps overnight there and leaves the next morning, which is likely to be the same as staying in the empty flat. On the one hand, these empty apartments are safe, like home, as they do in a sense function as her homes, but on the other hand they are as dangerous, in different ways, as her own squalid little apartment, with its dangerous faulty gas boiler, and she has to handle such uncertain problems alone. She is certainly aware of the threat-

3 The West End of Taipei was a centre of popular culture, but has been superseded by the East District since the 1980s. As the construction of the underground has finished in the late 1990s, the convenience of public transportation has brought the young people back to the West End. The Taipei City government also reorganised this area, regularly holding small-scale film festivals and performances. The movie street is the most well-known spot in the West End.





*The River*: Hsiao-Kang's problems with his neck and his father.

ening uncertainties in her empty apartments, but somehow does not give up looking for a sense of security within them, and this keeps her consciously moving around the empty apartments, trying to find a safe place to settle down.<sup>4</sup> The most unexpectedly emotional moment occurs at the very end of the film, when Lin goes out of the luxury apartment and into a nearly finished, constructed park, and sits near the outdoor concert hall and starts to cry. Scarcely looking satisfied with the sexual pleasure she had had the previous night, Lin is merely depressed. Her eyes empty, her face fallen, her thoughts presumably elsewhere, she appears utterly exhausted in the beautiful early morning. In the last three shots, for nearly seven minutes, Lin is framed promenading in the park, in which there is no music, no dialogue, but only her steps to be heard. The camera captures Lin's subtle change of mood through a series of long tracking shots and then a close-up, an editing technique which makes the viewer aware of her stress and get closer to her feelings. The conclusion of *Vive, L'amour* runs a rather different course from most of the films, as it does not intend to intervene, to liberate Lin from her life, her series of never ending days of moving around empty apartments. By placing Lin crying in an empty park at the end of the film, which Tsai is reluctant to give explanations of, *Vive, L'amour* states the dilemma that contemporary people are trapped in their lives and offered few choices by which to change them, which drives them to the edge of emotional emptiness. Perhaps the ending of *Vive, L'amour* ought not to be perceived as melodramatic, as it is an emotional sensibility that narrates the loneliness of present-day people, even as it leads us through the alienated modern culture towards a better under-

standing of its social viabilities.

Compared with *Rebels of the Neon God*, the presentation of Taipei in *Vive, L'amour* is different, not foregrounding high-rise, cheap, monotonous apartments built in the late seventies as a demonstration of the government's modernisation of living conditions, nor high-obsolescence streets where every corner looks like a construction site. On the contrary, the image of Taipei is bright and clean, which is completely different from that in *Rebels of the Neon God*, where it is wet and dark. On the other hand, Tsai's Taipei in *Vive, L'amour* is abstract and fragmented, and the regional colour is not as strong as that in *Rebels of the Neon God*, in which a typical West End culture is recognised. As Tsai has said in an interview, the focus of this film is on Taipei's citizens, so he blurs the lines between the West End and the East District, avoiding specifying any particular area of Taipei.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that Tsai makes the explicit connection between urban people and occupational options, supplying us with another framework for understanding the floating minds of modern people. But there are multiple levels of irony here. For example, Lin is an estate agent, and moves around the empty houses to promote them to her clients. Her wanderings from one empty flat to another, however, also represent her fight with her insecurity and loneliness, and her attempts to settle down emotionally. Ah-Jung sells clothes in the night streets, which is an unstable occupation, driving him to drift from one place to another.<sup>6</sup> Hsiao-Kang sells urns spaces, which is even more ironic as his job is house hunting for the dead, though he cannot find himself a place to settle down and has to barge into an empty flat to commit suicide. As Tsai himself reveals in an interview, his characters' occupa-



tions in *Vive, L'amour* show the emotional status of the Taipei citizen as being isolated and obscurely dissatisfied, which points to the alienation between people.<sup>7</sup> This alienation enhances the ironic gross on accounts of commercial relationships between people and thereby undercuts the possibility of an intimate relationship in Tsai's transient, comfortless Taipei. This buy-and-sell relationship distances people from emotional communication of any kind, viewing erotic contact as a business; for example, the mother's lover in *The River*, a pornography merchant, pirates other people's sexuality to make money but himself has scant interest in making love to his partner.<sup>8</sup> As the film critic Philip Kemp points out, the scenes in saunas in *The River* "offer a rather less erotic excitement than the average supermarket, (in which) the men who cruise these murky passageways treat their fellow-customers much like products on a shelf, or dishes in an automat—opening cubicle doors, glancing in at the contents, then closing them again without a word."<sup>9</sup> The visual potency of such a scene, which goes beyond its narrative purpose, is held in a long shot as the camera tracks forwards in the dim corridors, as if keen to violate the privacy behind each door. Shot with a haunting suggestiveness, the characters' desire for erotic contact to compensate for emotional emptiness is like shopping in a supermarket, by which Tsai suggests that contemporary people are emotionally pierced by consumerism, and physically paralysed by their consuming desires, leading to their collapse in emotional connections.

Desire and water are twin motifs in Tsai's films. The image of water has strong symbolic meanings in all Tsai's works, signifying emotional pain, sexual desire, or psychological fear. In *The River*, Hsiao-Kang develops an unbearable pain the day after he floats in the river, and none of the traditional or western medical treatments work on him. Hsiao-Kang's pain, which confines him for most of the movie to a neck-support, is possibly to be seen as his emotional denial of life, as he is extremely detached from his parents and unsure about his own sexuality. The opening scene of *The River* hovers around the landmark of central Taipei, where, on the way to the underground, Hsiao-Kang meets his ex-classmate, Hsiang-Chi. Though having sexual relations with her in a hotel, Hsiao-Kang has scant interest in keeping in touch with her, shown by Hsiang-Chi's immediate disappearance from the film. Yet Tsai does not limit Hsiao-Kang's sexuality to the single explanation suggested by his encounter with Hsiang-Chi, but rather holds it until the very end of the film. Hsiao-Kang seems to be emotionally detached from everything and everybody, particularly from his father, to whom he does not talk. Living with his parents in a small apartment, Hsiao-Kang rarely communicates with them, and the three family members are barely seen together in the same shot. As the film critic Tony Rayns comments, it is about half an hour into the film before the audience realise that they are a family, living essentially independent lives in the same apartment.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it is the detached relationship between Hsiao-Kang's parents, which causes the apathetic atmosphere of his family, that prevents him from getting closer to Hsiang-Chi, as his parents' marriage reminds him how a relationship would possibly develop. It is perhaps surprising that Tsai has

Hsiao-Kang find his father in the gay saunas and have sexual contact with him. However, Hsiao-Kang's sexual experience with his father in *The River* is aligned with the imaging of a new moral order, which is a metaphoric expression rather than a sensual gratification. The surface impression of a sexual relationship between father and son is probably striking and incongruous; however, their transgression of moral boundaries is constructed to be a narrative strategy to represent a break with previous Taiwanese cultural modalities. This sequence ends up with the father's furious slap on Hsiao-Kang's face, which is, subtly but strongly, much more an act of catharsis for the father's embarrassment than his anger. But even so, Tsai does not go for a clichéd final ending – Hsiao-Kang's pain is not released by his sexual satisfaction in the saunas, or by his father's blow, or even by his mother's stemming the flow of water from upstairs.<sup>11</sup> It might suggest a mood of utter despair, yet Tsai simply ends the film with no resolution of Hsiao-Kang's pain. There seems little doubt that Tsai's aim in making *The River* is to go as deeply as possible into the minds of the characters without abandoning his stylish deadpan black humour. *The River* is thus slyly humorous but not too pessimistic, amusing but not superficial.

Water is a recurrent image in Tsai's films, insidiously represented as an unpredictable and disruptive force to influence the characters' lives. In *The River*, the father has to confront the water pouring through his bedroom ceiling. Instead of sending for a plumber, the father manages to deflect the water out to the drains. Estranged from his wife and distant from his son, he is emotionally amputated and looking for comforts by visiting gay saunas in search of illicit sex. It is thus tempting to read the pouring of the water as a parallel to the emotional loneliness that he refuses to admit but diverts into a loveless sex in gay saunas.<sup>12</sup> As we watch the father's response to the downpour of water, we see how reluctant he is to come to terms with his emotional emptiness, which does not help to release him from the constraints of suppression of body and mind.

Tsai seems to hint that modern people are afraid to confront their emotional problems, and sexual pleasure becomes the escape route out of their emotional desert. This sexual implication is noted in *Rebels of the Neon God*, in which a high-

4 Hsieh Zen-Ch'ang, "Vive, L'amour: Interview with Tsai Ming-Liang," *Film Appreciation*, no. 71, Sep/Oct (Taipei: National Taiwan Film Institute, 1994), 46.

5 According to Tsai, Taipei City is the implicit protagonist of his first film, *Rebels of the Neon God*, in which the heavy traffic, the over crowded West End, and the humid rainy summer, set out his impression of Taipei. See: Hsieh, 47. Although Tsai did not intend to present a specific area of Taipei in *Vive, L'amour*, as he told Hsieh in his interview, the film is marked by its general focus on East District, which is distinguished for its night streets and luxury residences.

6 The police irregularly check business licences in the night streets and night markets. Those who do not obtain a licence from the government and get caught by the police, have to pay a fine. So when they hear the police coming, they quickly pack and run away.

7 Hsieh, 46.

8 Philip Kemp, "Bodily Fluids: Tsai Ming-Liang's *The River*," *Sight and Sound*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1998), 34.

9 Kemp, 34.

10 Tony Rayns, "Confrontation: Interview with Tsai Ming-Liang," *Sight and Sound*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1997), 15.

11 Kemp, 34.

12 Kemp, 34.



rise apartment is constantly flooded, serving to define the film's centre of gravity as the struggle of individuals to achieve their desires. When Ah-Tze notices that the water springs out from the drain in the kitchen, Ah-Kuei is with his brother in his room. Ignoring the flooding, Ah-Tze returns to his room where he hears Ah-Kuei having sex with his brother, and then he himself has an orgasm. Tsai mentions that he has always thought of water as a symbol of sexual desire, and this idea connects to the final sequence of *The River*, when the mother fights to staunch the streaming water.<sup>13</sup> Flirting with her boyfriend while he is sleeping, she is harshly and impatiently rejected. Stressed, she goes home, and sits in the dining room eating and drinking water, unaware that the flooding is spreading. Throughout the film, she is seen to eat and drink water, or watch pornographic films in her room, which explicitly serves as a sexual implication to note that she is emotionally isolated and tries to numb her sense of loneliness by sensual stimulation. The film's final confrontation between the mother and the flood also underscores the persistent bonding of sexual desire and emotional emptiness throughout Tsai's works, as they each recognise water as a sensitive correlative to emotion, as well as a force of desire. When the mother finally turns off the tap water in the unoccupied apartment, standing in the flooded kitchen in which everything is floating, she despairs, possibly because this reminds her of her emotional state, which is floating on sensual desires and offering no emotional access.

Apart from water, which is a significant motif running through Tsai's trilogy, homosexuality is another crucial theme inscribed in the films to affirm the changes in urban cultural patterns. Taipei comes to be seen as a place of infinite possibilities, and of liberation from the oppression of social and moral disciplines, a stage for a potential reformulation of the cultural landscape, sexual identity, and moral values. Taipei is constituted to introduce an urban landscape where individual desires freely circulate, switching sexual identity without the heavy baggage of morality. The framing of the personal desires makes Tsai's collective protagonist the embodiment of a social narrative whose grand theme is the shift from the phallogocentric social order to egocentric sexual liberation. In *Rebels of the Neon God*, Hsiao-Kang bumps into Ah-Tze, who he starts shadowing, utterly unaware that he possibly has a crush on him. In the film, Tsai hints at the homosexual predilection of Hsiao-Kang but does not manage to let his sexual attraction towards Ah-Tze grow; however, this kind of obscure relationship between two men is more developed in *Vive, L'amour*, in which Hsiao-Kang cooks and washes clothes for Ah-Jung. His essentially feminine characteristics are registered as a resistance to patriarchal constructions of sexual identity, and transcend its repressive categories. In one scene, Hsiao-Kang steals into Ah-Jung's room, where he opens Ah-Jung's suitcases and takes out the women's clothes that Ah-Jung bought abroad, standing in front of the mirror to try them on. Hsiao-Kang looks extremely excited when he puts on these garments one by one; he seems to identify with women by his fetish of dressing like them, and seems satisfied with this identity. A more ostentatious reference to Hsiao-Kang's ambivalent identity is present-

ed when he gets out from under the bed, gazes at the object of his sexual desire, Ah-Jung, who is sleeping, and moves close to him. Suddenly, he kisses Ah-Jung. Tsai keeps the camera fixed on the two men for a little longer, a sentimental move that allows Hsiao-Kang's secret adoration to float queasily before us, while Ah-Jung is sleeping but could wake up at any moment. At one point, Hsiao-Kang's kiss is a confirmation of his sexuality, which is reflective of the contemporary cultural impulse, symbolising that sexual deviation has been recognised as a part of modern culture.

Tsai's reframing of traditional morality and patriarchal society is also expressed in his portrayal of women. In *Vive, L'amour*, the estate agent, Lin, is a typical modern woman who is financially and emotionally independent, and capable of handling difficult situations, for example, fixing her failing gas boiler. It is not surprising to see the image of independent women in Tsai's films, as it has been well pictured in the New Cinema of the 1980s, for instance, Edward Yang's *Taipei Story/Qingmei zhuma* (1985), in which the female protagonist represents a positive image of professional women. What is extraordinary is that Tsai reverses the traditional sex roles, privileging female desire and power, to challenge the patriarchal structure of sexual pleasure and power. When Lin is aware of Ah-Jung's interest in her, she does not show her feelings, but keeps walking slowly and lets Ah-Jung follow her. It looks as though Lin is consciously seducing Ah-Jung, as she does not try to stop him following her, or attempt to get rid of him. She walks in front of him, dominating the situation. Even when they have sex, she is the one who dominates the relationship and does not allow him to kiss her. While Ah-Jung still remains in the throes of the previous night, Lin apathetically gets out of the bed and leaves. In these episodes, Tsai's camera prowls watchfully, keeping a certain distance so as not to interfere with Lin's dominance over Ah-Jung, which positively avows the change of gender boundaries.

As reflections and expressions of the contemporary culture, Tsai's films illuminate the increasing tendency of Taiwan's cultural development towards the pattern of western capitalist culture, indicating the breakdown of traditional social orders and values. Offering a portrait of modern people's applicability to the life of urbanised Taipei, Tsai's trilogy displays a vision of contemporary culture that captures the flow of urbanism, and the interplay between individual and society, which have charted new and exciting paths for Taiwanese filmmaking, symbolising the transformation of New Cinema in the 1990s. Tsai's Taipei trilogy not only presents a new visual rhetoric with the monitor-like long takes and non-linear narrative structures, but also makes Taipei a site in which the notion of modern Taiwanese cultural landscape and the ramifications of urbanisation could be addressed and debated. Tsai Ming-Liang is a filmmaker who deserves the closest attention.

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13 Rayns, 18.





# Chop Suey

## PHOTOGRAPHS TO REMEMBER YOU BY

by Richard Lippe

Bruce Weber's *Chop Suey* is one of the overlooked pleasures of the 2001 Toronto International Film Festival, receiving scant critical attention from the local press during the festival. Judging from its limited distribution, (the film, as far as I know, has had only a brief theatrical screening last fall at the Film Forum in New York City), it looks as if *Chop Suey* will be consigned to a direct-to-video release, which is unfortunate as the film is a visual delight which should be seen on a big screen.

Like Weber's previous features and shorts, *Chop Suey* is a documentary film which is autobiographical in nature. The film's ostensible subject matter is Peter Johnson, a young man from Wisconsin Weber discovered while photographing high school wrestlers gathered at a 1996 mid-western competition. In the next few years, the photographer turned Johnson into a highly paid and internationally known fashion model and homoerotic icon. During these years Weber took Johnson under his wing, becoming his friend and mentor and introducing Johnson to the arts and Weber's vision of the world. *Chop Suey* is an elaborate collage film (employing contemporary and archival footage, voiceover narration and interviews)

which loosely chronicles the young man's evolution, ending with Johnson's maturing into an independent adult person who has developed a more fully rounded idea of himself and the potential to be an open and expressive person. The film's title carries a two-fold purpose: 1) early on, Weber tells the viewer that when he began photographing Johnson, he, remembering his own high school days, decided to form a camera club and named it, in the capricious spirit of the undertaking, "the chop suey club"; 2) and the film, like the dish itself, is made up of odds and ends. Arguably, it is the 'odds and ends', which Weber supplies through a complex of elements from striking images to personal reflections to engaging personalities and more, that make *Chop Suey* an enjoyable and rewarding film.

Weber offers an explanation regarding his fascination with Johnson, suggesting that the latter embodies what he would like to have been as a youth; but, primarily, his interest in Johnson revolves around the photographer-subject relationship. Their professional (and personal) connections are, in fact, used as a point of departure by Weber to explore other meaningful relationships amongst people he knows well



and/or admires. The relationships that are depicted are diverse and include the thirty-some year partnership of singer-come-dienne Frances Faye and her manager/lover, Teri Shepherd. Weber is dealing with a wide range of experiences and feelings, from the light and humorous to the deeply emotional.

As for his concentration on and obsessive interest in photographing Johnson, Weber likens the experience to falling in love, the camera being the means to give expression to the feelings that the subject inspires. Weber says that the photographer's partner needs to realize that a potential rival exists with each subject the photographer encounters. To elaborate on his point, Weber makes reference to the relationship that developed between photographer(s) Edward Weston and Tina Modotti. Looking at photographs Weston took of her, Weber speculates that their particular intensity stems from his desire for her which led eventually to a love affair. He also suggests that while the photographer's impulse may be that of a lover, the photographic images produced might be the sole physical reality of the existence of those feelings. In the latter part of the film, a segment features Donald Sterzin, an editor at *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, who gave Weber his first big commercial break, putting one of his photographs on the cover of the magazine. Sterzin, a gay man who died of AIDS, had fallen in love with Jeff Aquilon, a model who happened to be heterosexual. Weber's story is about Sterzin's long term commitment to Aquilon, the friendship between the two men which lasted until the former's death. Weber, in photographing Aquilon, became a part of the relationship. The segment, as conceived by Weber, is a tender tribute to Sterzin, who was his friend, and a celebration of a love relationship that in part was given expression on the cover(s) and within the pages of a magazine.

In a film that is committed to an affirmation of life, creativity and self-actualization, a connecting thread and, in effect, its anchor, is the relationship between Faye and Shepherd. Their life together is accounted for in a series of commentaries by Shepherd, who was involved with Faye from the mid-1950s to the singer's death in the 1980s. Shepherd reminisces about their experiences in show business and she acknowledges the importance of Faye's legacy, particularly the recordings, which are a means by which she remains connected to the person she loved. *Chop Suey* contains a substantial amount of archival footage of Faye performing on television in the 1950s on such variety programs as "The Ed Sullivan Show". In part, what makes Faye a fascinating presence and performer was her willingness to be relatively open about her sexual orientation in a period that predates gay liberation. While she wasn't able to acknowledge publicly this aspect of her identity on American network television, there is Austrian television footage from the early 1960s in which Faye makes jokes that are clearly intended to let a knowing audience in on her lesbianism. Faye, in addition to being a highly accomplished pop music/jazz singer, has a sly and witty sense of humour. According to Shepherd, Faye was a 'singer's singer', attracting an unlikely group of performers from Frank Sinatra to the Beatles. She also mentions Bette Midler and it becomes evident from the Faye performance footage where Midler got inspiration for her own flamboyant and provocative persona. Weber

says he discovered Faye's recordings as a young man and that she made an immediate and lasting impact on him. Including Faye and Shepherd so prominently in the film makes it possible for a whole new audience to get acquainted with this remarkable artist.

If the Faye material isn't sufficient evidence, there is *Let's Get Lost*, Weber's tribute to Chet Baker, to illustrate the photographer's involvement with music and musicians. Undoubtedly one of the most 'musical' sequences in *Chop Suey*, which, in its free-wheeling approach, delights in the unexpected, is an elaborately edited sequence featuring the intercutting of a 1994 studio recording session of Robert Mitchum and clips from *Buster and Billie*, a 1974 Jan-Michael Vincent film, in which Vincent and his female co-star go skinny dipping. The result is a combination of the delightfully weird and the seductive. Weber is a longstanding admirer of Mitchum and he tells the viewer that Vincent was the first film star he was assigned to photograph, with the result that the job led to their becoming friends.

Another instance of Weber's inventive handling of his material occurs with the segment on the Fletcher family. The segment is introduced in a roundabout way: Diana Vreeland, *Vogue's* most well-known editor, seen in archival footage, expounds on the pleasure the idea of surfing gives her. The remark serves as an introduction to the Fletchers, who are identified as 'Nixon's Neighbors'. The Fletcher family lives in southern California and appear to be archetypal figures, evoking a 1960s image of health, sun, sand and carefree living. The segment is designed initially to evoke the period, featuring vibrant dayglow colours and psychedelic-like visuals and music. In a way, the Fletchers appear to be an all-American family in their unaffectedness and innate belief in themselves. Yet the family has a dark story to tell: one of the sons, Christopher, a champion surfer, became a drug addict and seemingly was in the process of destroying himself. But the story, true to the American tradition, has a happy ending as Christopher suddenly decided that he had enough and abandoned the addiction. His mother, Debi, in turn, to celebrate her son's recovery, decided to take up ballroom dancing and eventually became an award-winning dancer. The family's story is in equal measure wacky and somehow touching and believable given who the Fletchers are and their survival instincts.

Although the Fletchers border on being a bit idiosyncratic, they are no match for Diana Vreeland. Vreeland possesses a sophistication, wit, intelligence and sense of the theatrical that puts her in a class of her own. In addition to having an outrageous air about her, Vreeland is also a highly likable and accessible personality. In one of her stories, she mentions that she, when confronted by a demanding and unreasonable employee, said that only she [Vreeland] had earned the "right to die in an opium den in Hong Kong." The interview footage of Vreeland was shot in her New York City apartment and, interestingly enough, the surroundings, with lush reds and oranges, suggest what might be someone's fantasy of an exotic and very expensively decorated opium den. The beauty of her surroundings isn't missed by Weber, who, at one point, presents



footage of the apartment that I assume he shot expressly for the film. These images can be seen as functioning as a testament to Vreeland and her sense of style and love of excess. Weber tells the viewer that as a teenager the highlight of the month for him was the arrival in the mail of his mother's copy of *Vogue*. The revelation is charming (and, to me, highly understandable) but its primary purpose is to fully acknowledge the lasting influence Vreeland had on his aesthetic sense and the inspiration she gave him.

In *Chop Suey*, Weber makes reference to numerous photographers including, in addition to the already mentioned Edward Weston, his teacher Lisette Model, and Edouard Boubat. He also mentions prominent pioneering gay photographers whose work he values, Cecil Beaton and George Platt Lynes among others. These latter photographers had their own influences, and to a considerable extent their work was shaped by the aesthetics of classical art, a tradition that significantly informs the work of a Weber contemporary like Robert Mapplethorpe. While Weber's homoerotic work has a direct connection to gay photographers of the past, it belongs more to the 'naturalistic' setting of 1950s photographs in which male nudes are often pointedly posed. His work tends to deal with the real world, everyday life and experience; but, as *Chop Suey* indicates, Weber's aesthetic is also informed by an interest in artifice and fantasy. His male nudes are found in a familiar environment and the men are presented in a relaxed, unself-conscious manner. Weber's achievement has been to rewrite 'reality', its dictates and conventions. He has made it acceptable for the general public to appreciate the male nude body in photographs which often carry a homoerotic charge, partly because of Weber's sensitivity to the medium and partly through his investment in the sexual desirability of the subject. Weber's identity as a commercial photographer tends to obscure his considerable contribution in challenging the cultural taboo that patriarchy has imposed on the eroticizing of the male body and, by implication, homosexual desire. In Weber's vision, art and what it offers is an aspect of the real world. Weber, as he presents himself in *Chop Suey*, sees art as a means to extend and fulfil the self and as a way of relating to others. While Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photography is more politically radical (and placed in a more elite context) to the extent that it challenges notions of pornography, Weber's art is not without its own social value.

Arguably, the weakest aspect of *Chop Suey* involves the material dealing directly with Peter Johnson, because, although likeable and sincere, he has a bland personality. Weber's initial attraction to Johnson no doubt involved his physical presence, his good looks and boyish appeal; it may also have had something to do with Johnson's small-town innocence. The heterosexual Johnson comes from, as the viewer is shown, a very conventional middle-class background, making his friendship with Weber something of a daring undertaking. Weber is himself a product of mid-America. While the photographer may have identified with Johnson, seeing in the young man aspects of himself and the personable presence he would like to have had, Johnson, as he presents himself, doesn't come across as being creatively inclined. As said

earlier, *Chop Suey* tells the viewer that Weber has schooled Johnson, offering him the benefits of his taste, insights, and experiences. Still, although the gains Johnson has made through his association with Weber are admirable and Weber may be pleased by what has been accomplished, his presence in the film doesn't really contribute to it in a meaningful way.

In *Chop Suey*, Weber repeatedly foregrounds his mid-America upbringing and its relevance in shaping his life. He, in passing, suggests that aspects of his youth were troubling and unsatisfactory; yet he holds on to a vision of himself and the world that is grounded in being ordinary, open and optimistic about life. He doesn't offer an image of himself as a rich, professionally powerful and famous man. Instead, he chooses to see himself, as the film suggests, in Peter Johnson, as a person who is capable of responding with wonderment to the mysteries of life and with enthusiasm to the presence of a movie star. It may be Weber's ability to embody the contradictions of the small-town boy and an adult mature artist, as his work as a photographer and filmmaker illustrates, that makes him a fascinating person and a fitting subject for a film which is what, in fact, *Chop Suey* does.

*Chop Suey* is a documentary but the film moves beyond what the term usually implies. Weber has a firm control over form and technique and his skills in editing the material are extremely impressive. An aspect of his creative editing involves the ordering of the footage itself. *Chop Suey* is conceived to surprise and delight as it moves from sequence to sequence and at times from one stunning image to another. Given the film's 98 minute running time, this is a difficult challenge but Weber manages essentially to maintain this level of engagement. Another editing effect that is masterfully handled involves a number of intricate superimpositions, employing the use of colour, shapes, personage(s) and music.

While it could be argued that *Chop Suey* is intended to appeal primarily to a gay audience, I think it has the potential to relate to anyone interested in art, life and film.

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I was particularly pleased to find the still accompanying this piece because I think it so pointedly summarizes Weber's position on the photographer's obsession with his subject. The image not only documents the ongoing collaboration between Weber and Johnson, but it also evokes the influence of celebrity and stardom on the photographer's work. The photograph can be read as a homage (intentional or not) to a well-known 1933 Clarence Sinclair Bull photograph of Joan Crawford in which the actress, surrounded by multiple images of herself, is seen smiling and looking directly into the camera as she takes a break from autographing photographs. The photograph itself is intended to be a candid shot of Crawford at work; the photographs around her are glamorous studio shot images. In Weber's version the glamor is found in Johnson's nude presence and his offering of himself to the viewer. It is the explicit recognition of desire and the creation of fantasy. The photograph is playful and serious-minded, intimate and distancing.

I want to thank the Toronto International Film Festival and Cinematheque Ontario for making it possible for me to see the film.



# BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

## In Praise of The Liberal State

by Robert Lightning



Robin Wood's favorable reading of Jasmin Dizdar's award winning *Beautiful People* (*CineAction* #54) inspired me to re-view a film I had originally dismissed as an inconsequential if heart-warming exercise in humanism. (The jacket of the DVD release contains additional plaudits from Amy Taubin and A.O. Scott). Subsequent viewings, however, have only confirmed my initial suspicions of its liberal politics. More is at issue here than challenging a fellow critic's reading of Dizdar's rather cunning film (and as a consequence my argument will not take the form of a point-by-point challenge to Wood's reading). Dizdar's 1999 film (set in 1993) about Bosnian refugees in London must be viewed in the context of current global conditions. One consequence of the current U.S. military action in the Middle East subsequent to the attack on the World Trade Center has been the increase of already critical numbers of political refugees throughout the world. If we add to these numbers the movement of peoples as Labor resulting from the shiftings of the global economy as well as the post-colonial movement of peoples from former European colonies into First World countries (and the resistance to these movements by communities within the host countries) then this political context can certainly be described as an international crisis of migrating and uprooted people. The importance of Dizdar's little feel-good film is elevated by this context and as it is set in the host country of Great Britain essential issues are raised regarding both the interaction of host communities with immigrant population as well as state immigration policies. As the opening credits list a variety of British facilitating organizations (among them the BFI and the Arts Council of England) the reader might give these two points considerable attention.

### Britain

The film opens on a London city bus, travel abruptly disrupted by a fight between two Bosnian immigrants who (rediscovering each other apparently for the first time in London) have immediately renewed old inter-ethnic antagonisms. Robin Wood has described (correctly I think) the bus as "a microcosm of an embryonic multi-racial community" its passengers of various races and ages "sitting together peaceably". He is, however, silent about the conditions that make possible this peaceful co-

existence. Certainly the state's public service sector is much in evidence in this part of the film. The bus driver, for example, immediately takes charge of the situation, separates the two combatants and (finding them unwilling to desist) ejects them from the bus and resumes travel. Later a policewoman is found almost immediately to assist a woman in apparent distress and even a traffic cop's stop sign seems to encourage the two Bosnians to desist. Related to this are the representatives of the state's social welfare aspect, primarily the nurses and doctors in the hospital in which much of the film takes place but also a benign case worker who patiently explains (to an uncomprehending Bosnian immigrant) his state benefits.

We are very far here from those depictions of state bureaucracies (or our own experiences of them) as both inefficient and indifferent to human suffering, officialdom here depicted as both efficient (the bus driver, the policewoman) and benign (the hospital staff, the caseworker). This is why the film's references to traditional patriotic feeling (the statue of Churchill which hovers stolidly and with apparent displeasure over the combatants, the sample of one of Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* marches heard during a drive through the London streets) can only be taken as partly ironic, if ironic at all: The stable nation of myth, of common racial identity and common purpose has been replaced by the multi-racial and culturally diverse yet still stable Britain of today, stability now deriving from the state's efficient public service bureaucracies.

The impression of state beneficence remains despite the evidence of a contradictory government agenda regarding immigration (immigration agents who police the immigrant population, the reactionary pronouncements of a Tory statesman). We might compare Dizdar's division between good and bad policy with a similar division in Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. Whatever Capra's original intent in representing American capitalism through 'good' and 'bad' capitalists (respectively George Bailey and Mr. Potter) the film's greatness derives from his inability to maintain an absolute division, the narrative moving toward that climactic moment when bad capitalist designates good capitalist his twin ("...a warped, frustrated young man"). Operating as mutually exclusive tendencies of Britain's immigration policy, bad policy



in *Beautiful People* is easily subsumed within the overwhelming evidence of state beneficence. Bad policy registers in *Beautiful People* as an aberration rather than as a reflection of any ambivalent feelings held by the British voters regarding immigration.

### The British People

Ultimately the impression of state beneficence is dependent upon the British people themselves, both as employees within the public sector and (at least in theory) as those who give consensus collectively to public policy. In relation to the immigrant population, British altruism is much in evidence: By the conclusion several Londoners have not only taken a personal interest in an individual Bosnian or Bosnian family but have allowed an immigrant into his/her private life. British sensitivity to Bosnian suffering is so acute that it can even overwhelm the Personal: Scottish BBC journalist Jerry Higgins actually develops 'Bosnia syndrome', described in the film as "an obsession with helping people", a pathology that almost destroys his family life. As with the film's portrait of state beneficence, the impression of the people's kindness and sensitivity overwhelms the film's few representations of British intolerance. For instance the violent actions of three nationalist youths (both racist and anti-immigrant), presented in isolation within a general social atmosphere of civility, comes to appear (like bad state policy) an aberration. As for the Tory statesman (Thornton), his reactionary politics (he warns of the infusion into Britain of "foreign layabouts") are partly ameliorated by another authorial strategy: the suggestion that he is a political opportunist and merely mimicking the current prime minister. (The discussion at the breakfast table when the Thorntons are introduced concerns whether the father is a "brown nose"). In fact if there is one unregenerate villain in the film it is Thornton's rabidly conservative son whose narrative function appears to be twofold. On the one hand, he functions as a demonstration of the inhumanity of an ultra-conservative political position. (The son likens his father's 'foreign layabouts' speech to "bleeding heart platitudes"). On the other hand, as the film's sole representative of political intransigence, his presence automatically modifies our impression of his father's expressed politics, which by contrast come to seem more acceptable.

At no point in the film does Dizdar (who was born in Bosnia and immigrated to Great Britain in 1989) align himself explicitly on either side of the ethnic conflict central to the Bosnian civil war, his discretion (registering as political neutrality) appropriate to the film's anti-war stance. In a letter written in response to Wood's article ("Nationalism and the Zizek Syndrome", *CineAction* #55) Vladislav Mijic challenges Dizdar's apparent neutrality. He argues, for example, that those characters least subjected to the film's generally satiric tone (that is, those presented singularly as tragic victims of the war) are from the director's own ethnic background. My own limited knowledge of Dizdar's biography (all biographical data is taken from the Toronto Film Festival catalogue for the year 2000) as well as the finer points of ethnicity in the region (Mijic's argument is based partly on making distinctions between Muslim names and Croats) disallows my weighing in on the letter's content, although it seems clear that he raises vital points. I refer to the letter primarily for two reasons. First, it provides an opening for me to question both the

film's apparent neutrality and (related to this) the generosity for which the film has been explicitly praised. Political neutrality is a difficult proposition at any time and a particularly difficult (and dubious) achievement for an artist, particularly one personally implicated in the politics of a given work. Thus, I raise the issue of possible bias less as a criticism of Dizdar than to remind the reader to be ever vigilant for the signs and symptoms of partiality and political allegiance, particularly in seemingly 'neutral' works. Secondly, I wish to qualify Mijic's reading. If the film betrays signs of surreptitious ethnic bias, the opposition of ethnicities within the narrative is second to the opposition of (in Mijic's useful description) "two hybrid nations", Bosnia and Britain: It is the dialectical relationship between the two countries that drives the narrative and evidences a bias against Bosnia that is more pervasive than its ethnic bias.

The dichotomy of national characteristics (British kindness, altruism and social stability in opposition to Bosnian violence, brutality and social disintegration) pervades the entire film. In the case of the Bosnians, national characteristics transcend ethnicity, uniting all Bosnians ultimately in terms of violence and savagery. It is, in fact, the film's abrupt entry into a Bosnian war zone that confirms, by contrast, Britain's civilized values. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss the dichotomy of 'Bosnia' and 'Britain' as merely that of a nation at war and one at peace. For the film has already suggested (in ways both obvious and subtle) that its perspective on national differences will be essentially racial (if you will) rather than situational. The opening scene on the bus has already set up an opposition between Bosnian violence and obstinacy and British civility, a contrast that develops as the fight spills out onto the street and becomes spectacle for various bemused and bewildered London pedestrians. The use of lively 'ethnic' music as background suggests the filmmaker's attitude is equally bemused as well as condescending: The contrast in tone between the music and the extremely violent occurrence suggests the violence is not to be taken too seriously and that it is in stark contrast to (and easily contained by) the norms of a clearly civilized society. That the film's take on this occurrence is essentially racial is further suggested in a subsequent diner scene where the very same music issues from the walkman of another Bosnian, the apparently gentle and compliant Pero, linking him to his countrymen's violence. That he should eventually not only admit to his participation in wartime atrocities but explicitly equate his reform to becoming an English citizen ("I'm you now" he declares to an English audience at the conclusion) makes explicit the filmmaker's racial essentialism.

Thus the terms of the dichotomy of nations have already been established by the time the narrative shifts to Bosnia. The pivotal event of the Bosnia scenes is the amputation of a leg by medics (non-English and presumably Bosnian) without benefit of anesthesia. It is once again the opportune presence of gentle British citizens, Jerry Higgins (the BBC reporter who will develop Bosnia syndrome) and Griffin Midge (the gentlest of three violently nationalist youths who, in a telling Christian metaphor, is airlifted accidentally into Bosnia and descends like an angel), that shows up Bosnian brutality. Shocked by the proceedings ("You can't cut off his leg like that!") Griffin, a drug user, offers his last



hit of heroin as anesthetic, its numbing effects accompanied by 'ironic' heavenly music. These scenes are disturbing enough although I would argue that Dizdar's meandering camera disallows too close emotional involvement: They suffer in comparison with (for example) Hitchcock's inescapably agonizing buildup to the amputation in *Lifeboat*. Unfortunately, what begins as a (at least) potentially devastating account of a necessary consequence of war becomes instead an opportunity to again showcase British sensitivity: Not only is this the pivotal event in triggering Jerry's illness (identifying with the amputee, he becomes obsessed with having his own leg amputated after a comparatively minor leg wound) but Griffin is cured of his nascent racism, shortly thereafter returning to England with a wounded Bosnian boy. (It is worth noting that the hegemony of British sensitivity is not restricted to the Britain/Bosnia dialectic: At one point Jerry Higgins rescues Griffin from a particularly rough-and-ready American with the U.N. forces).

In the presence of hegemonic British sensitivity, the amputation comes to appear almost a savage rite rather than a consequence of war (which itself appears the apotheosis of Bosnia's 'inherent' brutality). Anti-Bosnian feeling even effects the film's seemingly progressive critique of masculinity, specifically as an aspect of national identity. The first clear lines of dialogue heard in the film are a radio announcer's reference to an historic 1993 soccer match between England and Holland, specifically referring to Rotterdam's plans to deal with the anticipated influx of rabble rousing soccer fans. (Shortly thereafter we learn the three rabble rousing nationalist youths, obsessive soccer fans, are planning a trip to Holland in support of the English team). Immediately afterwards, the bus melee begins, the bus driver dividing the combatants with the line "This is London Transport: We don't behave like that in this country" (thus defining British civility as both a matter of cultural norms and the policies of a state institution). The apparently developing critique of nationalist masculinity continues with the storyline of a Bosnian man who wants to kill his wife's soon-to-be-born baby, her pregnancy the result of a gang rape by opposing Bosnian soldiers. ("Baby my enemy" he declares). The parallels between violent Bosnian men infected by ethnic hatred and violent Britains infected by competitive sport is eventually abandoned. By the conclusion the three nationalist youths have been reformed of their racism and are last seen protectively hovering about the Bosnian child brought back by Griffin. As for the critique of competitive sports, amazingly Griffin is seen late in the film taking the still recuperating child to a sports bar to witness a sporting event. Which leaves at the conclusion only Bosnian men as the perpetrators of nationalist violence. It is true that the original two Bosnian combatants have modified their behavior by the conclusion. (Amazingly they are last seen channeling their aggressions through competitive play, in this case a card game). How successful their acculturation to British norms has been, however, is left open: The film's final image (before the credits) is of a Bosnian's raised, clenched fist.

### The Family

The film's conservatism extends beyond race. Robin Wood has commended the film for its revolutionary take on the family par-

ticularly that of Dr. Mouldy who, abandoned by wife and children, adopts the Bosnian couple and its newborn baby. I will return to the Mouldy instance but for now, while granting that the film is rich in images of nuclear family disintegration and stagnation, it nonetheless reinforces the traditional functions of parents. The film is particularly rich in mothers, traditionally the 'heart' of the family, bridge and bulwark between belligerent patriarchs and recalcitrant kids. Two mothers are rewarded for their forbearance: Mrs. Midge when her son is rehabilitated socially and morally and Mrs. Thornton when her rebellious daughter Portia marries (an event which, while undertaken ostensibly to prevent the deportation of her Bosnian lover, is nonetheless a step along the conventional female path). The film's dedication to motherhood is such that it is also littered with symbolic mothers, women who extend motherhood's primary functions, nurturing and socialization, beyond the home. Most obviously there is the head nurse in the ward where the two immigrant combatants from the opening (now injured) end up, who subjects her two charges to a regimen of tough love and a common sense program of behavior modification. There is also the matronly waitress in a café who actually chases after Pero several blocks to return his welfare certificate. (Fittingly the only patient care we see Dr. Portia Thornton perform is feeding soup to Pero).

But this dedication to motherhood creates unforeseen problems. The depiction of Mrs. Mouldy is contradictory at best. Belligerent, fretful and above all suspicious (her suspiciousness is indirectly responsible for the accident that lands Pero in the hospital) the film nonetheless implies that this clearly neurotic woman has a positive influence upon her two unruly and rebellious boys, whose behavior is considerably modified after she takes custody of them. (Technically her mother takes custody but she is presented as equally belligerent). It seems clear we are meant to infer that a mother (no matter who the mother) exerts a civilizing influence upon a child and, further, that Mrs. Mouldy's neurotic behavior derived from the unnatural separation of mother and children.

If the film affirms traditional motherhood, it seemingly attempts to modify traditional fatherhood. Thus we are meant to prefer Griffin's nurturing of the Bosnian child ("pushing the pram" as his nationalist friend puts it) to his father's uncompromising and rigid demands. Similarly, Jerry Higgins is 'reformed' of his neglectful ways and redirects his emotional commitment from Bosnian victims to his own daughter. I would argue that the film's commitment to a modified fatherhood is just as suspect in its ambiguities as its commitment to a modified masculinity (of which it is an obvious aspect): Griffin's tough disciplinarian father, for instance, is also a beloved teacher in an inner-city school (where, in one of recent cinema's most reactionary images, we see him surrounded by dozens of black and brown kids singing him birthday greetings). The 'modification' of fatherhood in Hollywood narratives of some twenty years ago is relevant here. Reacting to the gains of the modern feminist movement, specifically the reorganization of family life resulting from women's greater social mobility (and the threat to familiar Oedipal social relations perpetuated within the home), Hollywood began producing narratives (e.g. *Mr. Mom*) featuring



caretaker dads and absentee mothers. As in Dizdar's film, the modification of the traditional masculine social role in films of the early eighties actually provided a golden opportunity to demonstrate the extraneousness of Woman within the bourgeois home, that the father was quite capable of handling the job of socializing the young. (The regurgitation of patriarchal social and sexual norms directly from father to child within Hollywood narratives is still with us and transcends genre: witness *The Sixth Sense*, where Bruce Willis' father figure nurtures the screen's most besieged latchkey child).

But as Robin Wood brilliantly notes (in his *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*) the extraneousness of mothers in such films as *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Ordinary People* also reflects that Oedipal moment when the child comes to identify with the social and sexual demands of patriarchy through identification with the father, a moment when both the mother's Oedipal role and her function as buffer between father and child become superfluous. Thus, as caretaker to the Bosnian child, Griffin establishes his identification with the father (he is himself now a de facto dad) and completes his Oedipal journey. To signal this fact (as well as the bypassing of the mother in the socialization of the Bosnian child) Dizdar concludes with a seemingly extraneous 'comic' interlude in which Griffin's mom accidentally ingests some drugs, gets high and wakes to find that 1) her Oedipal necessity is at an end and 2) the mother's traditional domestic functions have been usurped by men. In perhaps the film's most telling image, our concluding view of Griffin's 'utopian' family has Griffin, his father and his reformed friends arranged in a final tableau about the Bosnian child, with Woman decidedly excluded from the circle. How To Look After An Immigrant

One effect of the film's stylization, with characters from the various storylines interrelating and crossing paths (sometimes in extremely minor ways), giving an overall impression of cohesion, is to obscure the film's several narrative contradictions (see also Mijic's letter). One of the film's most glaring contradictions is that between the Jerry Higgins storyline and that of Dr. Mouldy, the former ending with Higgins redirecting his commitments from Bosnian suffering to his own family while the latter is resolved in exactly the opposite way, each resolution presented as mutually exclusive and thematically self-contained. Wood is comparatively dismissive of the Higgins narrative but in a peculiar way its resolution lays bare the sterility of the film's family politics: The Higgins family (husband, wife, child) simply packs up and goes on a Hawaiian vacation. Despite more complex resolutions the political content of the film's other family storylines is hardly more progressive than the restoration of the traditional nuclear family presented here.

If its political content is equally reactionary, the symbolic material of the Mouldy storyline is more complex. The film's racial and family politics are united here within one of the hoariest of cultural metaphors: the doctor as adjudicator of social ills. The doctor's symbolic function in fictional texts derives from his professional intervention in matters of life and death. Here is Andrew Britton on the subject: "The power of life and death is the power of reward and punishment...and accordingly 'the hospital' is that lofty seat of social judgement...to which metaphysical emergencies are admitted for remedial surgery and interces-

sion, and for the tallying of the pros and cons of their reinstatement in the culture. Those of the good doctor's patients whose relationship to patriarchy is terminally contradictory expire under a cloud of pathos, but those who show promising signs of becoming normal at some future date are literally recuperated." ("A New Servitude", *CineAction* #26/27, p.49) The doctor's usurpation of the Creator's powers, however, is also a source of disquiet. It must be felt that his use of healing technique be in no way biased. His impartiality in life and death matters must be absolute. If it is not, he (for 'the doctor' is almost always a man) immediately becomes the bad doctor. The two bad doctors of *King's Row* (one murderous and one castrating), both respected family men, exemplify the extreme abuse of technique perpetrated by the physician personally invested in the maintenance of bourgeois private life. Thus the recurring celibacy (or at least singleness) of the good doctor in fiction: From Dr. Kildare to Marcus Welby M.D. to Dr. Larch in Hallstrom's *The Cider House Rules* the good doctor is almost always unmarried. (The symbolic social arbiter in fiction is hardly restricted to the medical profession and the stricture of celibacy placed on his/her judicial powers remains a common feature: note the bachelorhood of the investigators in detective fiction, from Sherlock Holmes to Jessica Fletcher).

The solution to the ambivalence the doctor arouses is not to reinforce his status as "secular deity" (Britton) but to recognize his fallibility, at which point his symbolic value as social arbiter in fiction immediately disappears. (The current challenge to bourgeois medicine's authority initiated by patient's rights advocates is encouraging. But the recent news of a British physician responsible for the murders of dozens of elderly women yet protected from investigation by local privacy laws tells us we have much farther to go). Dizdar takes the former path. There can be no doubt of Dr. Mouldy's devotion to both his children and his patients: He is simply making a botched job of his relationship to both. He must divest himself of one or the other and with the abdication of first his wife and then his children, he can finally fulfill his role as social arbiter. Mouldy himself seems well aware of this fact: Although clearly distressed when his wife finally gains custody of the children, he simply shuts the door and turns his complete attention to his adopted Bosnian family. The social problem in *Beautiful People* in need of the doctor's remedial attention is immigration. The metaphorical function of the medical profession becomes obvious if it is noted that every one of the film's Bosnian immigrants is essentially under a doctor's care at the conclusion. Recalling Britton's description, those immigrants with the greatest chance of successful integration into British society (Pero, the Bosnian family, Griffin's adopted child) are given provisional bills of health and released under the care of a personal physician (respectively Portia Thornton, Mouldy and Griffin Midge, who by way of his medical ministrings in Bosnia becomes an honorary doctor). On the other hand, those terminally opposed to British social norms become permanent residents of 'the hospital' (an anti-English Welsh terrorist who, with the declaration "It's my ward!", explicitly lays claim to a portion of the hospital). As for those showing promising signs of future recovery yet also some signs of resistance to treatment (the two Bosnian combatants), they are left in a state of medical limbo.



## Conclusion

"The biggest thing going on in the world now is the movement of peoples. Not necessarily war refugees, but just people are moving. And all of the legislation is to keep them from moving or to deal with them once they have moved, or to educate them or to not educate them, or to throw them out or burn them, or, you know, whatever. That's what global policy is now about: What are we going to do with the people outside who are now inside?" (Toni Morrison, *Vibe Magazine*, May 1998, p.98)

Immigration is the disease that threatens in *Beautiful People*, the most extreme form of the disease being the violence and savagery the film applies almost exclusively to Bosnians. British civilization is both the cure and the organism threatened. And it is to protect the British body politic from infection that the Bosnian immigrants are committed to observation by 'the doctor'. Early in the film a caller to a radio program is heard commenting (in reference to immigration policy) "I think any measures you take should be targeted solely against trouble-makers". And yet, as most of the Bosnians are under 'house arrest' at the conclusion (to apply another apposite metaphor to Dizdar's treatment of immigration) and two are 'in custody' it seems all the Bosnians are considered potential

threats. The film's "generosity" is provisional at best.

In fact the metaphorical agenda to which the Bosnians are subjected is aligned very closely with Thornton's call for unspecified "curbs" on immigration. I have already discussed the film's turning toward the father in terms of the family but it seems to me turning toward 'the father' has broader implications in terms of the film's domestic politics. Is the middle-aged man (a guest at Portia's wedding) who assigns blame to both sides of the Bosnian conflict a parody of British upper-class complacency or a political savant? Just whose position does the film ultimately support, the unconventional screwball comedy heiress who (working in an inner-city public hospital!) is apparently ignorant of the state's policing of the immigrant community or her equally generic Tory dad? As with so many neo-liberal works the plethora of political positions given voice in the name of 'fairness' helps to disguise the text's more reactionary aspects. (Just what does it mean in terms of immigrants organizing to protect themselves from state harassment that all the film's major Bosnian characters are eventually dispersed into the white suburbs of London?). From my position, to answer these questions it is absolutely necessary to resist the film's provisional generosity as well as its liberal sheen.

## Letter

To the Editors,

When I watched Amos Gitai's *Kippur* I became depressed about its lack of political content. When I read the *CineAction* review by Florence Jacobowitz in Issue 54, I felt a strong sense of déjà vu. Neither Gitai nor Jacobowitz appear to have any sense of the context in which the film has been produced and is being distributed. Given the latest phase of Israeli militarism, this is pretty myopic.

In a seminal article in *Movie* 27/28 Andrew Britton commented on Vietnam movies, "...any account of America's involvement in Vietnam (or in Chile or Nicaragua) [or one might add, the Middle East] which is based on moral condemnation alone is doomed to irrelevance, because ethical objections to that involvement can only be formulated in terms of a political analysis of its objective determinants and aims." *Kippur* doesn't even reach the first base of a moral position. I can only assume that Gitai and Jacobowitz can't get beyond the short-sighted views, which fail even to recognise the existence of Palestinian people.

Since *CineAction* appears to regard itself as a liberal film journal I would have hoped for a rather more critical response to the film. Perhaps you could make amends by launching a long overdue critical project. The analysis of the Zionist line in so many western popular films, from *Exodus* to *Schindler's List* and *One Day in September*.

Waiting in anticipation.

Keith Withall,

Leeds, UK

## Response

Amos Gitai has directed a number of highly politicized films, like the controversial pro-Palestinian *House* (1980) and *Field Diary* (1982), which evidence the artist's commitment and determination to present the Israeli-Palestinian struggle to secure an equitable solution in a manner not only considerate of Palestinian concerns but also highly critical of those of Israel.

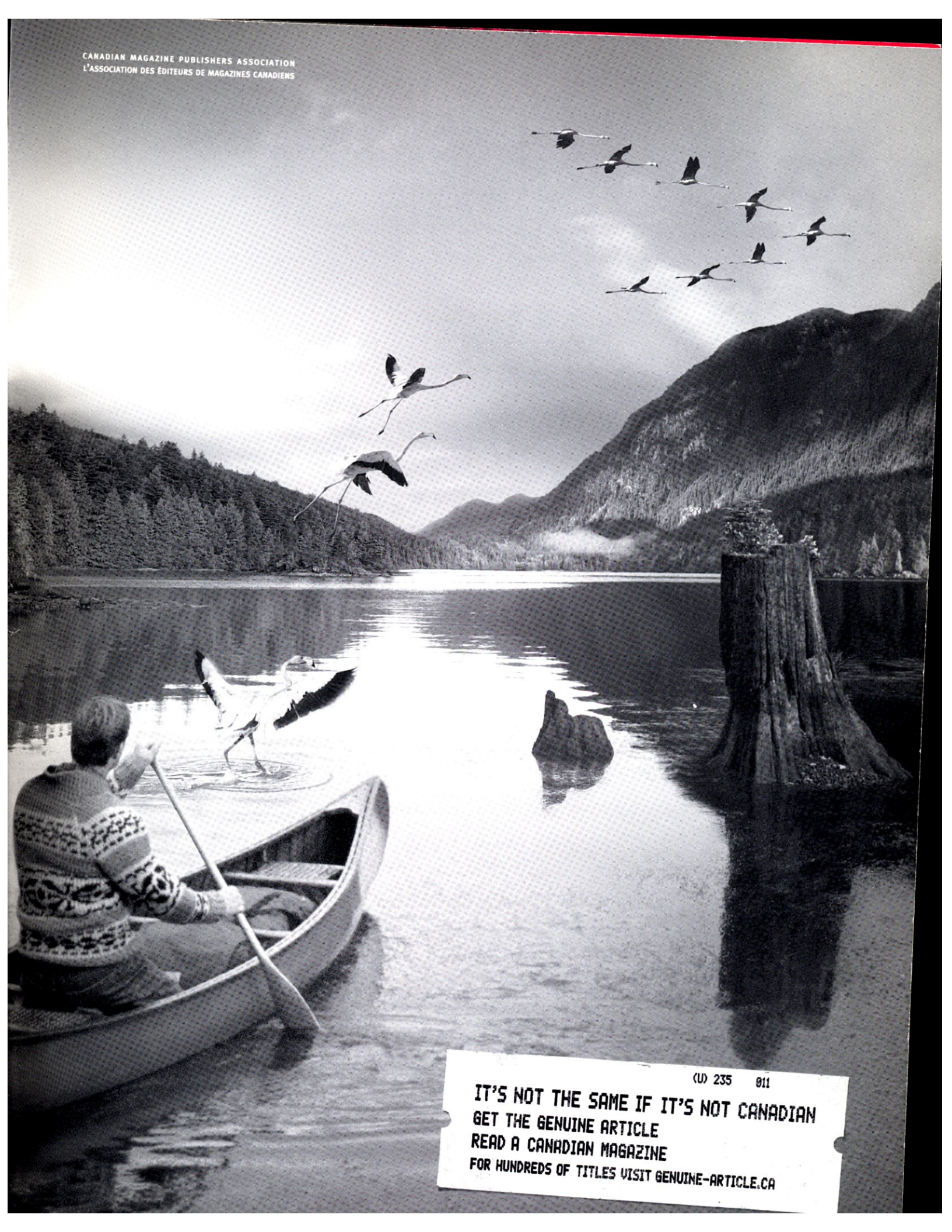
*Kippur* is an autobiographical work that draws from Gitai's experience of being called up to serve in the Israeli army at the start of the Yom Kippur war. It is, finally, a condemnation of war and the violence it engenders. *Kippur* is not a film which addresses Israel's right to defend itself. Withall's summoning of the late Andrew Britton's characteristically brilliant article on Vietnam to prop up a blinkered position is misguided. *Kippur* is not accounting for Israel's involvement in the way the American films discussed are an account of America's position in Vietnam. I highly doubt Britton would have rejected Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* for being an anti-war film that fails to present a political analysis of its context.

I've never understood why a "liberal" journal must automatically adopt a critical stance against any work by an Israeli-born artist about Israel. Withall claims to have watched the film, but anyone who can write the final sentence of this letter isn't seeing anything objectively. The call for *CineAction* to publish a long overdue exposé of the insidious Zionist/Jewish infiltration of Hollywood from Preminger to Spielberg is unnecessary as it has already been written. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—that locus classicus of antisemitism—makes the same argument.

Florence Jacobowitz



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